No. 44 5 CENTS

Young Rough Riders Weekly

MOST FASCINATING WESTERN STORIES

TED STRONG IN OLD MEXICO

OR The Haunted Hacienda

BY NED TAYLOR

Another rough-looking man dashed out of the shrubbery, and leaping on the horse behind Ted, tried to pull him out of the saddle.

Announcement. Readers of this weekly will find that the stories have been increased more than one-third over their former length. This increase is made in response to a general demand that the weekly be issued more frequently than once a week. To do that is impossible, but we have increased the length to show our appreciation of the favor with which these stories have been received. You will find that there is no drop in the quality with the increase. From this on, these stories will be the longest as well as the best of their kind published.

The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

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The Young Rough Rider in Old Mexico;

OR,

THE HAUNTED HACIENDA.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

ESTEVAN, THE SHEPHERD.

It was a beautiful night, late in the year, but the air was as warm and soft as it is in August in northern latitudes.

On all sides stretched the rolling land that formed one of the best grazing stretches in old Mexico.

There was no moon, but the sky presented a more brilliant aspect than it ever does north of the tropics.

The air on the table-lands of Mexico is wonderfully clear and pure, and through it the stars shine with a radiance that cannot be described.

There was not a cloud in the sky, and the whole heavens were a beautiful fretwork of golden constellations.

In that southern region, new groups of stars, such as are never seen further north, seemed suspended far above the horizon by invisible wires.

There was the southern cross, the most beautiful of all constellations, and a hundred other stars and planets known only to those who have studied the skies through the long watches of a tropical night.

There was a faint light, through which the country could be seen for miles around.

It was open, rolling country, broken here and there by mottes or clumps of timber that looked like black shadows in the night.

In all the wide expanse that could be seen on every hand, there was only one human being.

This being was standing near a rock, on the top of a low hill, leaning against a long staff, and brooding over

the scene with strange and melancholy eyes, more like the eyes of some solitary animal than the eyes of a man.

He had been standing motionless in the same position for nearly half an hour, and yet not the first sign of restlessness or fatigue showed in any of the lines of his figure.

He wore a battered straw hat, the brim missing from one side, and a heavy blanket was over his shoulders.

His other garments were a stained cotton shirt, cotton trousers with holes at the knees, and on his bare feet were rawhide sandals, with a string passing between the big toe and the rest of the foot.

His long, black hair hung down over his eyes, and a straggling beard covered the lower part of his face.

His eyes, together with their settled expression of melancholy, wore a curious, startled look.

This was Estevan, the herdsman.

He was a Mexican *peon*, in the service of Señor Gonzales, one of the richest sheep farmers in the country.

It was his duty to take care of the flocks of this outlying sheep farm, and a more solitary life than his could not be imagined.

Twice a year this man brought his flocks to the ranch house, twenty miles away, for shearing.

The remaining time he spent in loneliness on the prairie or in the chaparral thickets.

His wages were six dollars a month in Mexican money —a good deal less in ours—a bushel of meal, a little salt pork and a little coffee.

Supplies were taken to him every thirty days, but were generally left at his camp, from which he was absent except when he was sleeping.

Thus it was that for months at a time he held converse with no human being.

Occasionlly he saw the *vaqueros* riding the range afar off; still more rarely, one of them came close enough to him to hallo to him.

He was not thirty years old, but exposure and brooding gave him the look of fifty.

He had no weapons, and depended entirely on a fire to him to halloo to him.

In short, he was a typical Mexican shepherd, a man who, like all his class, had grown to have a distaste for the society of his fellow men.

And yet Estevan, in spite of his wild eyes and animal appearance, had a great deal more courage than most of his fellows.

Five men in succession had disappeared from the sheep range which he was now watching.

How they disappeared, no one knew.

The Mexicans said that it was a ghost—"The White Death," they called it—that had carried them off one after the other, as they had been sent out there.

With the death of each herdsman there had been a loss of numbers of sheep.

The animals left without a shepherd invariably follow each other to their destruction, over some precipice or into a chaparral thicket, where they are killed by the wild beasts.

One herdsman after another had been sent to take care of the sheep that were left.

Señor Gonzales had acted on the theory that his men had gone crazy and wandered off or killed themselves.

Herdsmen, owing to their solitary life, often do this.

He laughed at the superstitious talk of the White Death, and said that there was no such specter save in the imagination of the people who talked about it.

Finally, however, there came a time when all the herdsmen had refused to take charge of these sheep, and this sheep farm was left as deserted as though it had been ravaged by the plague.

Gonzales was angry.

He had lost thousands of dollars' worth of sheep, and he finally sent an escort of armed *vaqueros* to watch the place and try and discover the cause of the disappearance of the herdsmen, one after the other.

With the *vaqueros* had gone Estevan, who had applied for work at that time, and said that he was not afraid to face the White Death.

And it seemed now that the White Death was really imaginary.

For a full week seven *vaqueros* had camped out on the rolling prairie, watching and guarding Estevan while Estevan watched and guarded the sheep.

Day after day had passed away.

A watch was kept both by day and by night.

Yet nothing out of the ordinary was seen.

Not even a wolf howled near the camp of the *vaqueros*, and, search as they might, the watches could find nothing to indicate the presence of the specter that they had heard so much about.

At the end of the week, Gonzales had decided that his first idea was the correct one.

There was no need to pay his men to watch out there on the prairie for nothing.

They were needed elsewhere, as the rancher was making a round-up of his herds, preparatory to sending one of them North to market.

He summoned his *vaqueros* back to the ranch, and they rode off, leaving Estevan alone with his sheep.

It was the first night after the leaving of the *vaqueros*.

They had pranced away on their gayly caparisoned steeds, and through that day Estevan, the herdsman, had been left in the solitude that he loved above all other things.

Now he was standing alone in the starlight, looking out over his flock.

It was stretched out on the hillside below him, and no one but a herdsman could have distinguished it at all.

Estevan, however, could see the animals plainly enough in the starlight.

His eyes were trained so that he could see sheep anywhere in almost any light.

"All quiet," muttered Estevan to himself, in the Spanish dialect that the Mexican *peons* use. "All quiet, and the sheep are slumbering. There is no need for fear. They were trying to frighten me when they told me of the White Death. The *vaqueros* stayed for a week, and they could not see it. I am here alone now, I cannot see it."

Estevan noticed a stir among his sheep, and he stepped forward a little.

At the same time a long, low wail came from somewhere in a motte of timber off to the right.

Estevan started and listened.

It was something like the howl of a wolf.

The shepherd ran back to his fire, which was smoldering, and threw on a lot of fresh wood.

The fire blazed up and threw a bright light around.

The howling ceased, but a moment later it arose from another quarter.

"Strange!" muttered Estevan, gripping his long staff tight in his knotted fingers. "For a week we were here, and no wolf howled. Now the *vaqueros* have gone. The wolf howls. What can it signify?"

The howling ceased again as suddenly as it had commenced.

Estevan stepped forward and glanced over his sheep.

There was only a small flock left on the range.

The rest of them had been killed.

By the White Death, the *peons* said; by the carelessness of the shepherds, Gonzales said.

Estevan glanced at them and saw that they were all right.

Then he looked at the motte of timber from which he had heard the howling of the wolf.

As he looked there came another long-drawn howl.

It was the howl of a hungry wolf this time, and no mistake.

Estevan dashed back to his fire, and seized up a brand of pinon wood that burned and flared out like a torch.

With this in his hand, he approached the timber to scare the wolf away.

He approached the timber without the first idea of fear in him.

He knew that a wolf was easily scared by fire, and he was so familiar with the animals that, although he was unarmed, he had no dread of them.

As he came nearer, however, the howling ceased.

"I will find out the wolf, wherever it is!" muttered Estevan, as, holding his brand, above his head, he marched boldly up to the timber.

"Halt!"

The command seemed to be spoken in a sort of ghostly whisper.

Yet it carried in all directions.

The sound seemed to fill the whole air about him.

Estevan came to a standstill, staring at the timber before him.

The brand fell to the ground from his hand, and his eyes dilated with horror.

There, in the timber before him, was the White Death!

There could be no mistaking it.

Estevan had heard descriptions of it from natives who claimed to have seen it. He had thought that they were lying.

Now he saw it himself, and knew that they had described it truly.

It was the figure of a man, apparently much taller and larger than ordinary men.

It was dressed in a sweeping sombrero and a long Spanish cloak that fell almost to its heels.

The face was clearly distinguishable from where the shepherd stood.

It was a horrible face to look upon, large and bony, with a great, hooked nose and an evil smile.

It seemed the face of a man who had grown old in crime, and whose face bore the traces of all his evil passions.

But there was something else about the figure that was more surprising and alarming than all of this.

It was white from head to foot.

The sweeping sombrero was white.

The long plume that fell over the brim on one side was white.

The face was white, eyes and lips, even; and yet the features were plainly distinguishable.

The Spanish cloak that fell to the heels of the figure was white.

It was a luminous sort of white—not a dead white, but a sort of phosphorescent color that gave off a weird halo of light.

Estevan tossed his hands in the air and fell to the ground.

He had fainted with fright.

Those who came to look for him, a week later, found the sheep strayed and scattered.

The shepherd could not be found.

CHAPTER II.

AT THE LAS ANIMAS RANCH.

At a long table, in a comfortable room in a ranch house, sat four remarkable-looking figures.

The one at the end of the table was the one that would perhaps have attracted attention the first.

It was a handsome boy, brown-eyed and brown-haired, with a look of determination and resolution in his face.

He was clad in a closely fitting suit of brown khaki cloth, cut after the military fashion.

It had evidently seen hard service, but it was still smart and jaunty, and it fitted the lines of the boy's figure to perfection, showing a compact, well-knit body, a powerful pair of shoulders, and the general physique of a well-trained athlete.

Around the boy's waist was a web belt, supporting a long-barreled Colt revolver, and containing a row of gleaming cartridges in its loops.

Instead of boots, the boy wore a pair of brown leather leggins, and on his heels were a pair of short cavalry spurs, instead of the barbarous Mexican spurs that Southern ranchers usually wear.

On the table beside him lay a brown sombrero and a heavy pair of gauntlet gloves, showing that the boy had been out riding a short time ago.

The brown tint of his face, through which a healthy flush shone, was evidence that he spent the greater portion of his time in the open air.

This was Ted Strong, known throughout the West as the young rough rider.

After leaving the army, he had come West to run a ranch, and had formed an organization of boys, known as the young rough riders.

The young rough riders, under Ted's leadership, had made a great success of their ranches and mines.

Two other members of the organization, also wearing the khaki uniform in which Ted was dressed, were sitting at the table.

One of them was slight and slim and wiry.

A mane of long, yellow hair hung down upon his shoulders.

His eyes were a light, sparkling blue, and his face wore an expression of good humor mingled with devil-may-care recklessness.

This was Bud Morgan, a member of the young rough riders, and one of Ted's closest friends.

He had been a cowboy on the trail and on various ranches, North and South, from the Rio Grande to the Canadian border, before he met the young rough rider and joined his organization.

He was a typical Westerner, from sombrero to spur.

The other khaki-clad fellow was large and broad-shouldered, with a short nose and a heavy, resolute chin.

This was Ben Tremont.

He was a college man, who had won fame for himself as a football player and an all-round athlete before he came West to join the young rough riders.

He was reputed to be one of the strongest men in America, and his enormous shoulders and great, massive muscles, that showed plainly through his khaki coat, indicated that he could back up his reputation with deeds, if necessary.

The other figure at the table was that of a man of an entirely different type.

He was a Mexican, about thirty years of age, to judge from his face, and of a slender, graceful build.

He had the dark eyes and dark hair of his race, and there was something courtly and fascinating in the expression of his sallow, oval face.

The young rough rider had just entered the room of the ranch house with his two friends, and had found this Mexican waiting for them.

He had handed his card to the young rough rider, and introduced himself as Señor Miguel Gonzales, of the Las Palomas Ranch, in Mexico.

Ted had begged him to be seated, and had sat down at the table himself.

This ranch house was one in which the young rough rider held a part interest.

It was situated in Dimmitt County, Texas, just a little way from the Rio Grande River, which forms the boundary between that State and Mexico.

It was known as the Las Animas Ranch.

The three young rough riders had been staying there for a few weeks, rounding up some of the herds and preparing them for the trip northward to Montana, where they were to be marketed.

They were preparing to leave the ranch for the North that very morning, and had just taken a final ride about the place, to see that everything was all right before their departure.

Now they found a stranger and a Mexican awaiting them on their return.

Gonzales was quite at his ease.

He had the manners of a man of the world who was used to meeting people of all classes and descriptions.

He accepted Ted's invitation to be seated, and immediately broached the business that had brought him there.

"You will no doubt be surprised, Señor Strong," he said, "at receiving a visit from one of whom you have never even heard."

"I have heard of you; I have heard the ranchmen along the border speak of you as one of the most up-to-date and richest ranchers across the border in Mexico."

Gonzales waved his hands before him, shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"As for my riches," he said, "they are nothing compared to the wealth of you Americans, who handle thousands as we handle hundreds or tens. As for my being up-to-date, I am so far behind the times that I am forced to come up here to ask your advice on a matter which perhaps will seem ridiculous. I have come here to ask your assistance."

"My assistance!"

"Yes. If you will do me the favor to attend for a moment, I will explain. You know that in my country there is a stretch of land which I use, not for the herding of cattle, but for the grazing of sheep."

"Yes, I had heard that you raised sheep, as well as cows, and that you were very successful at it."

"Successful! That is not the case. I was successful for a time. But lately my losses have been very great."

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said Bud Morgan. "Has some mavericks been stealin' sheep on ye? An' ye want ther young rough riders to go down an' catch them? That's jest ther job fer me. There's fightin' in that. I'm pinin' away for a fight."

"I'll give you what you are pining for, then," growled Ben Tremont, in his deep voice, "if you don't stop interrupting."

"It is the assistance of the young rough riders that I came for," said Gonzales. "But it is not against a sheep stealer that I want help. My own *vaqueros* could attend to that. It is something that we cannot understand and cannot handle. I have always admired the Americans, their great enterprise and courage and energy. I have tried to imitate their methods in running my business. This is a problem that I cannot solve. I want to attack it as an American would. I had often heard that the young rough riders represented the very best that there is in American life. That they were the ideal types of American young men——"

"So they are!" shouted the irrepressible Bud Morgan. "Look at me! I'm an ideel, all right! An' there's Ted. But this big dub, Ben Tremont, he's a no-account coy——"

Ben suppressed the cowboy by laying his hand across his mouth and holding it there.

Gonzales, smiling at the interruption, went on:

"I was told that if there was any one person who could help me, it would be Ted Strong, the young rough rider. I also learned that you were down here at the Las Animas Ranch, only a little distance across the border. Assure yourself that I lost no time in starting to see you. I forded the Rio, and rode hard till I got here. I was afraid that you might have left before I could arrive. I am fortunate indeed to find you here."

"What is the trouble on your sheep ranch?"

"Are you prepared to help me? Let me assure you that this will be no loss to you if you do. I am willing to pay——"

"The amount that you are willing to pay has nothing to do with it. I was thinking of taking a trip down to Mexico, to see the country and to see what the possibilities were for ranching and sheep raising, but I don't know whether I will be able to do anything for you or not until you tell me what it is that has been troubling you."

"The possibilities for sheep raising were good there, but they are not now. Owing to this ghost, I have lost thousands of sheep."

"This ghost! Is it a ghost that is bothering you?"

"A specter has been killing off my sheep herders or driving them crazy. I do not know which."

"Señor, if you have come up here to joke with me, I can tell you that I have no time for joking."

"I am not joking. I, too, have no time for joking. It is a serious matter with me."

"But you do not mean to say that a ghost has been bothering you? You do not mean to say that you believe in ghosts?"

"I used to laugh at those who believed in them. Till the disappearance of the last of the shepherds that I sent there—Estevan—I thought that it was all nonsense. But now I do not know what to think."

It was evident that Gonzales was deeply moved.

The sweat was standing out on his forehead, and his face, naturally pale, had turned several shades paler.

"I laughed at ghosts," he said. "But one must believe the evidence of his own eyes."

"Did you see the ghost with your own eyes?"

The young rough rider leaned forward across the table, and looked interested.

"With my own eyes."

"What is it like?"

"A tall man. He looks like an ancient Spanish cavalier, wearing a Spanish hat with a plume and a long Spanish cloak."

"Some one masquerading in that costume."

"No one made of flesh and blood. This specter is white, and it is of such a strange white that it gives off light like the moon. My people had told me about it, but I did not believe it until lately. It came to me in the night, and told me that Estevan, my herder, was vanished. He simply spoke the words to me: 'Estevan is gone; your sheep have perished.' I fired at the specter, but it was gone, and there was darkness in the room again. Two days later a *vaquero* rode in. He had been to Estevan's cabin. Estevan was nowhere to be seen. The sheep had run into a river and drowned. I heard that you were here, and I came at once."

"How do you account for the appearance and disappearance of the specter in your room?"

"I do not know how to account for it. It has long been said that the Las Palomas Ranch was haunted. I never saw a ghost before."

"Was there no window or door by which it might have entered or left?"

"The door was locked. I tried it afterward. The window had a mosquito net across it. When I arose from my bed I found that the mosquito net was unbroken. It was tacked to the corners of the window so that it could not be pushed to one side."

"Did the specter say anything more than what you have told me?"

"Yes; it said—I will see if I cannot remember the exact words—it said: 'Send no more sheep to graze on the range, or the White Death will haunt you and bring destruction upon you.'"

"Did it say this in English or in Spanish?"

"In both languages."

"How do you mean?"

"It repeated it first in English, and then in Spanish."

"And then vanished?"

"Yes."

"Do you know of anyone who wants to prevent you from raising sheep?"

"No; the idea has never occurred to me."

"Is it your own land that the sheep graze on?"

"No; it is an open range, owned by the government. It is good for nothing but grazing. No one dwells there. It is quite desert."

"In the mountains?"

"It is in the foothills, rolling land."

"Well," said the young rough rider, rising to his feet, "your story interests me a great deal. If you will stay to dinner with us here, we will ride back with you."

"You are going to help me, then?"

"I don't know whether I can help you or not. I am going to look into the matter, at any rate."

Gonzales leaped out of his chair, seized the hand of the young rough rider, and thanked him effusively.

A little later all four sat down to dinner, during which Gonzales told them a great deal more about the White Death, the *blanca morte,* as the Mexicans called it, and the various appearances it had made at the ranch and the haunted *hacienda* in which he dwelt.

CHAPTER III.

IN OLD MEXICO.

The three young rough riders were down in old Mexico.

Ted had been there before, but the two other boys had never visited it.

They found there a lot of things that delighted them.

They were staying at the Las Palomas Ranch, with Gonzales, and they were very much interested in noting the difference between the running of that ranch and a ranch in Texas, or further north in the United States.

In the first place, the *vaqueros* were a very different lot from the cowboys that they had been used to see on the ranches in Texas and Dakota.

They were dark, rather good-looking fellows.

Most of them were undersized, and all of them were bow-legged.

They had flashing, dark eyes and greasy, black hair.

It was in their clothes, however, that they were most noticeable.

Tight-fitting breeches of velvet, shiny boots, with long, jingling spurs and enormously high heels, little velvet coats, and silk sashes of all the colors of the rainbow, made them figures that looked as if they had stepped directly off the stage from some comic opera.

They wore tall, conical hats made out of straw and dyed with a variety of startling colors.

They swaggered about the ranch in great style, but when it came to riding, they showed themselves off at their very best.

They looked much better on the back of a horse than off it, and even Bud Morgan admitted that they were pretty good at trick riding, although they were not as good at handling cattle as the American cowboys, who did not wear such gaudy clothes or swagger about so much.

Bud and Ben spent a good deal of their time sampling strange Mexican dishes that they easily procured from the cook in the big kitchen of the ranch house.

The young rough rider himself, however, had other work on hand.

He had come to the ranch for the purpose of finding out if he could the secret of the White Death, and he lost no time in getting to work.

In the first place, he questioned all the people about the ranch who had seen or claimed to have seen the vision.

The young rough rider could speak Spanish with considerable fluency, and he had no difficulty in understanding the people about the ranch.

Their stories all agreed—that was the surprising thing about it.

Of course Ted Strong did not believe in ghosts or visions, but before he was through questioning these people, he was certain that they had seen something out of the ordinary.

What it was, or how it had been caused, where it had come from, or where it had gone to, he could not say.

His next work was to examine the room in which

Gonzales said that the White Death had appeared to him.

He entered it, with the owner of the ranch, and found that, as the Mexican had said, the window was covered with a mosquito net.

An examination of this net showed that it had been nailed fast there with tacks a considerable time before, and that it had not been disturbed since it had been put in place.

The White Death had not entered or left the room that way.

"I know not how to explain it, señor," said Gonzales. "It is a puzzle to me. There is the door leading into the hall. It is behind my bed. I had it locked. The key was in my pocket."

"You tried the lock after the ghost, or whatever it was, had gone?"

"I tried it. It was locked. I confess, señor, that I am beginning to believe in ghosts. There is no other way to explain this."

Ted sat down on the edge of the bed and looked about him.

"This room is on the ground floor," he said. "It would be an easy thing to enter or leave otherwise than by the door."

"But the mosquito net?"

"There are possibly other ways than the window and the door."

"There can be none."

"There must be some. If the ghost went in and out, and did not use either door or window, there must be some other method of going in and out."

"How? What is it?"

"I do not know as yet. Is there a cellar under this portion of the house?"

"No; this is the older part of the house. There is a cellar under the other wing, but none under this."

Ted remained silent for a few moments, plunged in thought.

"You have not slept in this room since the night on which you saw the vision?" he asked, after a brief silence.

"No."

"Nothing out of the way has happened about the house?"

Gonzales seemed to hesitate.

"Nothing worth telling you about," he said, at length.

"I'll be the judge of that," said the young rough rider. "Let me hear it."

"Well—you will laugh at me for thinking of such a trifle, and for thinking of it in connection with this ghost—but since I saw that White Death my memory seems to be failing me. It frightens me a little. I cannot understand it."

"Your memory seems to be failing you? In what way?"

"I seem to lose all recollection of little things. When I lay an article out of my hands, I straightway forget where it is. Some of the things I cannot find again. Others I find in places where I was sure that I did not leave them. It seems to me that I must be going crazy."

"Give me some instances of this."

"Well, take this morning: I was at my writing desk. I was writing a letter to my sister, who is in Barcelona, in Spain. I had a letter that came from her in my hand, together with some other papers—contracts with cattle men, and so forth. I laid them down on the desk."

"Where is your desk?"

"In a room that I call my office."

"On this floor?"

"On the floor above."

"And you have not found them yet?"

"On the contrary, I have found them. That is the most puzzling thing about it."

"You did not find them in the desk where you thought you left them?"

"I found them in the very last place where I expected to find them. You will laugh, señor, when I tell you."

"Tell me."

"I found them under the pillow of the bed in this room."

The young rough rider did not laugh.

Instead of that, he looked at the bed that he was sitting on, and tumbled the pillows carelessly over with his hand.

"How did you come to look for them here?" he said, without showing the slightest surprise.

"I was not looking for them here. I strolled into this room while I was waiting for you to come upstairs and look at it. I glanced at the bed, and happened to toss the pillow over with my hand, just as you have done. Under it—imagine my surprise?—I found the papers and the letters that I had been looking for all morning."

"Were the papers of any particular value?"

"Not at all; they were just some memoranda of old sales that I had made for my sister."

"Nothing in them that anyone would care to steal?"

"No; I am not afraid of anyone stealing them. The thing that annoys me in the incident is that I had not the faintest idea of having come into this room at all. I thought that it remained closed since the day before."

"Could not some one else have carried the papers in here?"

"Who would think of doing such a thing?"

"I don't know. But would it not be possible?"

"No. There is only one key to this room. It is in my pocket."

"None of the servants have a key to it?"

"No."

"And you had this key in your pocket all the time?"

"Yes."

"Is there anything else that you have mislaid in this way?"

"Yes, a few other things. But this does not seem to have anything to do with the White Death, if you will pardon me for remarking it."

"Never mind. What were the things that you mislaid?"

"Papers, mostly, out of my desk."

"All of them papers?"

"Now that I come to think of it—all papers. I seem to have a shorter and a worse memory about papers than about anything else."

"Did you find all these papers again?"

"Yes; I think I found them all."

"Where?"

"In various places. Some of them I found lying on the floor in the hallway."

"The hallway leading to this room?"

"Yes; others I found on the stairway."

Ted rose to his feet and cast a glance about the room.

"How far is it to the place where your sheep farm is?"

"Where my sheep farm was. All, or practically all, of my sheep are gone now. It is about ten miles."

The young rough rider looked at his watch.

"I can ride over there and back before nightfall," he said. "I will do so. I want to take a look around the place."

"I will give you an escort of *vaqueros*."

"Thank you, but I prefer to go alone."

"As you will."

"And I have another favor to ask of you."

"I will grant it if it is within my power."

"I want to sleep in this room to-night."

"You are a brave man, señor."

"And I want you to keep everyone in the house igno rant of the fact that I am to sleep here."

"I understand."

CHAPTER IV.

A RIDE ACROSS THE PRAIRIE.

Ted Strong was mounted on the back of a good horse a half hour later.

Strapped in one of the saddlebags were two or three sandwiches, which were to serve him as lunch.

With a twenty-mile ride, to the outlying sheep farm and back, he knew that he would not return there until late that night.

In his pocket he had the key of the haunted room.

He had locked it himself after leaving it in the company of Gonzales.

When he returned, if he came home late, he could let himself in and go to bed without disturbing anyone in the ranch house, or letting it be known to anyone where he was spending the night.

Both Bud and Ben were anxious to accompany Ted, but the young rough rider said that he would prefer to go alone.

Gonzales was making a round-up of some cattle that day, and the young rough rider asked his two followers to stay about the ranch and make certain investigations.

After bidding farewell to his companions, and giving them some private instructions, the young rough rider gave his horse the rein and went off at a brisk pace.

The horse was a spirited animal, and the day was so fresh and so cool that there was a real pleasure in hard riding.

It was not long till the ranch house, the buildings of the *vaqueros* that adjoined it, and the clump of trees that surrounded it were left far behind.

Ted Strong had received directions as to how to find the cabin that had been occupied by Estevan and the other unfortunate shepherds who were supposed to have been carried off or killed by the White Death.

Gonzales had urged again and again that the young rough rider should take an escort, or at least one man, to guide him on this journey to the sheep farm, but Ted had insisted on going alone.

He had reasons of his own for doing so.

He thought that one man would attract a great deal less notice on the sheep farm than three or four, and he did not want anyone else on the ranch to know of the investigations that he was carrying on.

After he left the ranch, he found that the land grew a little more mountainous and rolling where it sloped up to the higher mesas where the sheep had been put out to graze.

Here and there there were clumps of timber.

The trail which wound across the country was scarcely recognizable, but the young rough rider had little difficulty in following it.

He was used to following trails, and although sometimes he was obliged to pull his horse down to a walk and look about him carefully for a moment or so, in the main he covered the ground at a very good pace.

As the sun rose higher and the day grew a little hotter, he allowed his animal to move forward at a walk.

It was glad to do so.

It had been running hard through the morning, and was in a good deal of a lather.

It now moved along, with its head hanging and the reins thrown loosely on its neck.

The young rough rider lounged backward in the saddle, and took it easy.

He felt the heat as well as did the animal, and he had not had very much sleep for the past two or three nights.

It was while sauntering along in this fashion that the young rough rider noticed a figure suddenly appear from a clump of timber dead ahead of him.

It was the figure of a man, not a Mexican, and was clad in the garments of a cowboy rather than in the gaudier clothes of a *vaquero.*

He was mounted on a good horse, and he pulled this to a standstill right across the trail, as though he were waiting for the approach of the young rough rider.

Ted sat up in his saddle and looked ahead in an instant.

He had not expected to see anyone in that desolate waste of country, and this man did not look altogether the kind of person you would like to meet alone on a dark night.

He was a fellow of above the middle height, broad and thickset.

As the young rough rider came nearer, he could see that he was heavily bearded, and that such part of his face as did show above the beard was burnt to a heavy brown, as though the man had spent all his life in the open air.

He sat his horse in a way that showed that he was a good rider, and from a little distance off the young rough rider could see that there was a big revolver hanging at his hip.

Ted knew that it would be a foolish thing to draw his own revolver, and precipitate a gun fight before he found out whether this individual was friend or foe.

He cast a glance at his own revolver, to see that it was in position within easy reach, poising himself in the saddle to be able to leap to one side or urge his horse forward at an instant's notice.

At the same time he looked around to see how the country lay on either hand.

This strange, bearded horseman had chosen an admirable spot to block the path of anyone who chanced to come that way.

On both sides of him were clumps of trees and rocky eminences, so that the path that led between them was so narrow that he could fill the whole passage with the form of his horse.

He looked at the young rough rider as though he were waiting for him to approach, and began to whistle a tune.

Ted saw that there was no use in turning back.

He thought that, as like as not, this man might be some honest cowboy out on a long ride, and anxious to speak to one of his own kind or to ask the way in that deserted spot.

His first words confirmed this idea.

"Hello, pard," he said. "How many miles do yer calkilate it is ter ther Las Palomas Ranch?"

"About ten," said the young rough rider.

"Just come from there yourself?"

"Yes."

"Yer the feller who they calls ther young rough rider, ain't yer?"

"I don't know that it is any of your business who I am."

"It is a whole lot of my business. Hands up!"

With the last command, the bearded man swung up a big revolver with lightning speed.

He was not quite so speedy, however, as the young rough rider.

Ted could act quickly in the case of emergencies, and he was on his guard this time.

As the man's revolver went up, Ted's hand went up at the same time.

It was open, and held no weapon.

It caught at the barrel of the revolver when it went up into the air, and caught it in a grip that could not be shaken.

There was a moment of tugging and straining, a moment in which the strength of this man's wrist was matched against the strength of the wrist of the young rough rider.

Then Ted's strength proved the greater.

There was a cry of pain from the man.

The revolver tumbled to the ground.

At the same instant the young rough rider dropped his own hand to his belt and drew forth his own shooter.

He had determined that this man was an outlaw, and he meant to take no chances with him.

As the young rough rider leveled his weapon, he heard footsteps behind him.

Another rough-looking man dashed out of the shrubbery and, leaping on the horse behind Ted, tried to pull him out of the saddle.

The mounted man grasped his wrist and pushed the revolver up.

A third armed man appeared on foot.

It was three to one.

The young rough rider felt himself being dragged backward out of the saddle.

He could not use all his strength to fight with either of the two men who had attacked him.

They were grappling with him from before and be-

hind at the same time, and the young rough rider felt that the odds against him were too great.

He held onto his saddle, and did his best to get his weapon down so that he could fire at the first outlaw.

He did not succeed in doing this.

The last man who had appeared dashed forward to his side, and caught hold of him round the waist, joining his strength to that of the two others.

It was too much.

The young rough rider was thrown heavily to the ground, and at the same time the two men who had appeared on foot piled onto him, holding him down by sitting on his chest and limbs, and starting at once to tie him up with stout rope which they carried.

For a moment the young rough rider was stunned with this sudden attack and with the heavy fall that he had had from his horse.

But it was only for a moment.

The outlaws had no chance to tie the young rough rider before he recovered his full strength and consciousness.

Then they found that fighting with Ted Strong was a different matter from what they had expected it to be.

When he has not been angered or excited in any way, the young rough rider is a boy of unusual strength.

He has the build of an athlete, and a superb muscular development.

He has what a great many athletes have not, a complete control over all his muscles, so that he can do just what he wants with them.

But when he is angry, or when the odds are going against him, the young rough rider seems to redouble his strength.

He has that nervous force that counts for so much more than physical muscular power, and upon which he can call in the time of emergency.

At the present instant the three outlaws were experiencing a tremendous surprise.

The young rough rider had fallen to earth with a thud that seemed to knock all the breath and life out of him.

But now, when they threw themselves upon him, they found that his fall had seemed to increase his strength, instead of diminish it.

For a fraction of a second he lay absolutely passive in their hands.

Then he began to move.

With a sudden twist, that used almost every muscle in his whole body, he cast to one side the two outlaws who were holding him down, and sent them staggering away.

He was still lying on the ground himself.

Before he could arise, the one who had tackled him first leaped off his horse and rushed at him.

Ted saw him coming.

He did not attempt to get on his feet.

He knew that there would be no time for that.

As the man dashed for him, he let out a great kick with one foot.

It caught the outlaw on the chest, and sent him to the ground in a heap.

At the same time the young rough rider sprang to his feet.

In his hand was the revolver which he had twisted from the hand of the outlaw, and which he had picked up as he lay on the ground.

This had been done so quickly that the two outlaws who had been cast to one side were still crouching on the ground, having not yet had time to get to their feet.

One of them strightened up and rushed at Ted.

The young rough rider waited for him, and met him with a stunning blow on the forehead.

He tossed his hands into the air with a sort of groan, and fell forward on his face.

The other fellow, who carried a weapon, saw the fate of his two comrades, and did not come near the young rough rider.

He made a dash for one of the horses and leaped into the saddle.

At the same instant the revolver in the hands of the young rough rider cracked.

The outlaw was quick, and just as the weapon flashed, he dropped down behind the shoulder of his horse, Comanche fashion, spurring it forward at the same time.

Ted fired at him again.

But the young rough rider had no chance for good shooting.

The man who had been kicked on the chest was on his feet again, and had a revolver in his hand.

He fired at the young rough rider, and Ted could feel a plucking at his arm as a bullet passed through his sleeve.

His own shot went wild entirely, the outlaw he had fired on speeding further and further away.

He turned his weapon at the man who was firing at him.

C-r-a-c-k!

Both weapons exploded at the same time, as though the two had been fighting a duel, and had fired at a given word.

The outlaw had fired at the head of the young rough rider, and would have shot him dead, so sure was his aim, had not the young rough rider made a shot that was still better.

Ted's bullet struck the outlaw on the hand that held the revolver.

It smashed the lock of the weapon and some of the bones of the man's hand.

It was just in time to spoil the aim and deflect the muzzle of the revolver.

A moment later and the young rough rider would have been shot dead.

As it was, the outlaw uttered a wild scream of mortal agony.

His weapon clattered to the ground.

It was useless now.

He himself turned and dived madly into the bushes.

The young rough rider had his blood up.

He had been attacked suddenly and murderously by three men, and he wanted to know the reason why.

As he dived into the clump of bushes, the fellow emerged at the other side on horseback.

Ted fired with the last chamber of his weapon.

But the cartridge was spoiled, and it merely clicked.

Before the young rough rider could reload, the outlaw had ridden around a hill and was out of sight.

"No use chasing those fellows," said Ted, between set teeth. "But there is a man here on the ground who may be able to tell me something."

He darted back through the bushes, and found that he was almost too late to get hold of this man.

The fellow had recovered consciousness and was on his feet.

He started off on a run for another clump of trees when he saw the young rough rider approaching.

Ted followed him.

Seeing that he would be caught, the fellow turned and struck him a heavy blow with his fist.

It did not stop the young rough rider for a moment.

He was hot with the fury of fighting now, and he rushed in with two crashing blows.

They both landed with terrible force on the point of the man's jaw.

He fell to earth, knocked senseless once more.

CHAPTER V.

CROSS-EXAMINATION.

When the outlaw who had just felt the power of the young rough rider's fists came to his senses, he was lying on his back, under the shade of a clump of cottonwood trees, at the side of the trail.

He looked about him with dull, wondering eyes.

The top of his head ached where the butt of Ted's revolver had landed on it.

But his jawbone, where the young rough rider's fists had landed, ached still more.

The fists of the young rough rider actually seemed to be harder and have more punishing power than the butt of the heavy revolver.

It was late in the afternoon.

He must have lain there, unconscious, for some time.

A short distance away, staked out in the shade, were the horse that he had ridden, and that he had been running to get when the young rough rider had overtaken him, and the horse that had been ridden by the young rough rider himself.

Ted Strong was seated on a little hillock of grass, near by.

He had his canteen lying at his side, and was munching quietly at a sandwich, as though fighting with three outlaws and making a prisoner of one of them was the thing above all others that gave him a good appetite for lunch.

There was not the faintest trace of excitement in his appearance.

His face had not a scratch on it, and his neatly fitting, khaki clothes looked as clean as though he had never been sent rolling in the dust.

Looking at him, the outlaw felt that the events of the morning had been some sort of a bad dream.

The boy sitting there so quiet and collected.

It could not be possible that he had fought all three of them single-handed and so successfully.

But there was the pain in his head and in his jaws.

That was undeniable.

And there were the bonds that bound his hands and feet.

The outlaw looked at them.

It was new rope cut from a lariat that had been hanging at the pommel of his own saddle.

He strained at the bonds.

He had been tied so that he was entirely comfortable as he lay on his back—that is, comfortable save for the dizziness and pain that he was still suffering as a result of his recent fight with the young rough rider.

His hands were down at his side and tied there in a natural position.

His ankles were tied together.

The outlaw strained at the bonds, but he found that the young rough rider knew how to tie knots.

They did not give in the least.

Instead, they seemed to draw tighter.

The young rough rider tossed the remains of a sandwich away from him, and glanced in the direction of the outlaw.

"No use trying that," he said. "They are too tight. The more they pull the tighter they are."

The outlaw stopped straining and glared at the young rough rider in mingled astonishment and rage.

Ted got on his feet and strolled leisurely over to him, looking down into his face.

"Well," he said. "You have come to yourself a little. That's what I was waiting for. I was just having a little lunch while you were lying there dozing off the effects of those taps that you received on the jaw."

"Cure yer," gritted the man, who was rough-looking and bearded, like the fellow who had stopped the young rough rider, "let me up."

"I'll let you up when I get through talking to you. Maybe then, maybe not."

"Let me up now."

"Couldn't think of it. I want to have a nice, little talk with you, and you might hurry away if I untied you."

"I'll kill yer yet."

"I think not. You won't do it while you are straining at those cords. You will notice that there is a piece of the rope passed across your throat in front and under the armpits. The harder you strain, the tighter that will draw across your throat. If you pull hard enough, you may succeed in choking yourself. Try it; it would be an interesting experiment."

What the young rough rider said was a fact.

While the man had been lying unconscious, Ted had plenty of time to tie him up.

He had used it to the best advantage, tying the rope in a way that he learned from the Indians.

There was absolutely no escape from it, and the tighter the prisoner pulled, the tighter the cord was drawn about his neck.

The prisoner soon was aware of this fact himself.

An unusually strong effort sent the cord cutting into his throat.

He lay there gasping.

His eyes were bulging out, and he could not get his breath.

He might have choked without being able to do a thing to help himself had not the young rough rider leaned forward and loosened the cord at his throat.

"Perhaps you will lie a little quieter, now," he said. "You see that what I told you was the truth."

"What does yer want with me?"

The outlaw seemed in a more reasonable frame of mind now.

This boy held the upper hand and seemed able to hold it.

"What do I want with you? I want you to tell me who you are?"

"It won't help you none ter know who I am."

"Who are you?"

The young rough rider grasped hold of one of the cords and gave it a little pull.

The prisoner began to gasp for breath.

"Perhaps you feel a little more like talking now," said the young rough rider, pleasantly. "Who are you?"

"Bill Horan is my name."

"What is your business?"

"Ain't got no business."

"What do you do to get your living?"

"Robs people. I'm an outlaw."

"You're a liar."

Horan's countenance grew black with wrath.

"If I was on my feet, yer young pup," he growled, "yer wouldn't dare ter call me no liar."

Ted laughed.

"If you were an outlaw," he said, "you would not care much whether you were called a liar or not."

"If you knows what I am, why doesn't yer tell me?"

"I don't know what you are, but I can make a pretty good guess."

"What am I?"

"In the first place, you are no outlaw."

"How do you know that?"

"If you had been, you would have shot at me in the first place, instead of trying to take me prisoner."

"I wish I had."

"Probably. But you didn't. In the second place, a glance at your hands shows me that you have been handling a lariat a great deal lately."

The way Horan clinched his hands, or tried to clinch them, and flushed, told that there was something in what the young rough rider had said.

"Maybe you're one of these yere palmists, or sich like, as kin tell ther past hist'ry of a man from ther lines on his hand," he said, sarcastically.

"Not quite," said the young rough rider. "But I can tell that you are not an out-and-out road agent. You ride a cow saddle. The pommel of that saddle has been used a good deal in roping cattle lately. You have been working on a ranch lately."

"Suppose'n I have. What is it to you?"

"Not so much to me as it is to you, perhaps. It saves your life. If I thought that you were an out-and-out robber, I would take you back to Las Palomas. You know what they would do to you there. You are an outlaw, according to your own confession. The Mexican ranchers don't show much mercy to Yankee outlaws. They know that the government will back them up against lawbreakers and robbers, and so they are not afraid, as they are with law-abiding Americans."

Horan turned sickly pale.

"Yer an Amerrikin yerself," he said. "Fer Heaven's sake! yer wouldn't turn me over ter them ther Greasers?"

"I thought that view of the matter would put some

sense into your head. You will admit, now, that you are not an ordinary road agent."

"I held yer up on ther road."

"But that is the first job of the kind that you ever did."

"I suppose so."

"And you did not hold me up with the intention of getting money out of me."

"What did I do it fer, then?"

"That's what I propose to find out. You know who I am."

"Ther young rough rider."

"And you held me up with your friends, not intending to kill me, but to ride me out of the way some place."

"Ther boys didn't wanter kill yer, although ther boss said ter shoot, if it were necessary."

"Who is the boss?"

Ted expected to get Horan to tell him this without thinking, but he shut up like a clam.

"I don't give away on my pals," he said.

"Who are your pals?"

"You're cute; but I won't talk."

Ted moved a little closer to his prisoner and looked down into his face.

The man was forced to look up into the boy's eyes.

Ordinarily the eyes of the young rough rider are kind of expression, but at the present moment they had taken on a look that was absolutely merciless.

"Listen," he said, in low, vibrating tones. "I have you in my power. A turn of my hand would end you. I want information. If I get it, you go free. If not——" the young rough rider seized the rope at his throat and gave it a twist.

Horan was as pale as death, but there was a steady look in his eyes.

"Yer has ther drop, pard," he said, in hoarse tones. "I suppose as how it serves me right. But I can't go back on my pals."

"To save your life?"

The rope tightened so that Horan could scarcely speak.

"No."

The young rough rider leaped to his feet with a kindlier look on his face.

"I respect your scruples," he said. "You won't die by my hand, anyway."

CHAPTER VI.

BACK TO LAS PALOMAS.

Bill Horan lay there trembling and gasping.

He had confidently expected that the young rough rider would throttle him to death.

There had been no mercy in his face.

He had felt the cord drawing tighter and tighter.

The young rough rider had given him the impression that he was either going to make him talk or kill him.

Horan, however, had resolutely held to his determination to die before he would tell who his associates or who his employer was.

The young rough rider could not help having a certain amount of respect for a man of this stamp.

He had come to the conclusion before now, that Horan was an American cowboy and not an outlaw, and that he had been hired to assist in kidnaping him for some special purpose.

Now he was sure of it.

No outlaw would have shown that courage and honor in the face of death.

"I tell you what, Horan," said the young rough rider, looking down at him, "you are a great deal too good for this business."

"You ain't goin' ter kill me?"

"No; I don't kill people in cold blood. I had you bluffed, though. You thought I was."

"I did, sure. I thought you had lost yer temper. But I couldn't do nothin'. I was tied here so I couldn't move."

"And you couldn't go back on your friends."

"No."

"Well, I'll tell you something. You are a great deal too good for work of this kind, and for your friends. You ought to earn your living honestly on a ranch."

"So I did, till these gol-durned sheep raisers come around here an' sp'iled all ther country about here."

"I thought that this thing was a case of cattle men against sheep men. Now, you have dropped a word or two that makes me sure of it. You are engaged in an attempt to make Gonzales quit the sheep business."

"I don't know nothin' about that."

"But I do. Gonzales did not tell me anything about it, but I guessed that it was a war of this kind. Now, listen, Horan."

"I'm listenin'."

"I have a proposition to make to you."

"Not to split on the people that paid me for this."

"No; not that. I know the style of a man you are. But I am convinced that the people who are back of you in this are a good deal worse than you are."

"I dunno."

"Of course you don't. You are a cowpuncher, and I tell you that ordinarily I am with the cowpuncher and against the sheep man every time. But when the cattle men begin to descend to violence and cruelty, I stop. I'm for law and order all the time. I came down here to solve a mystery, and I am going to do it."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing that you can't do with honor, and nothing that is very hard to perform."

"What is it?"

"I want you to give me your word that you will not engage any more in this thing, and that you will not say anything to anyone about having met with me. I want you to get on your horse and ride across the Rio into Texas just as fast as it will carry you."

"And starve there? None of the ranchers will give me a job there. None of them know me."

"I'll give you a note to the *secundo* at the Las Animas Ranch, in Dimmitt County. The young rough riders own half of that ranch. Present it to him, and he will give you a job."

"What else do you want me to do?"

"Stay there and work there, like an honest man, and not come back to Mexico till this whole business is over."

"It's a go, pard. I'm with yer on that proposition."

"Give me your word of honor?"

"Sure! On my honor!"

"That goes with me. I thought that you were an honest ranch hand who had been roped into this thing."

The young rough rider leaned forward and untied one of the knots, giving the rope a sudden twist.

Horan was free at once.

He climbed to his feet, looking at the rope with wonder in his eyes.

"Gee-rusalem!" he said. "Yer a slick hand at tiein' ropes."

"Have to be if you rope many cows," said the young rough rider.

"And yer pretty good with yer fists. I thort I was a scrapper, but yer laid me out in two good wallops."

"If you had landed the same blows on me, you would have knocked me out."

"But I didn't. Yer all right. I've hearn as how ther young rough rider was a pretty swift proposition, but I thort as how it was all bluff and stories thet hed been made up about him. But I guess they was all straight."

Ted was paying no attention to the last remarks that had been made by Horan.

He had drawn a notebook from his pocket, and was writing in it with a stump of a pencil that was attached to it by a string.

He tore out the sheet on which he had been writing, folded it up and handed it over to Horan.

"You know where the Las Animas Ranch is, in Dimmitt County?" he said.

"Sure! The best steers in all ther Lone Star State is raised thar."

"Well, give that note to the foreman there. He'll look out for you as long as you behave yourself."

Horan took the note and put it in his pocket.

"There is your horse," continued the young rough rider. "I think you will find it in good trim. It has been grazing. With steady riding you can be across the Rio and up in Dimmitt County by to-morrow morning."

"I've hearn how ther young rough rider was a pooty good sort, but I never thort as how you was as good as this."

"Never mind all that. Get on your horse and get away. And remember after this that the proper thing for you to do is to work like an honest ranch man and not let yourself be used as a tool by some unscrupulous individual."

Horan stood looking at the young rough rider for a moment in silence.

"Pard," he said, slowly, "yer has certainly used me right all ther way round. Yer beat me out when it come ter ther fightin' but yer didn't take no unfair advantage of me at that. An' then yer treated me squar' arterwards. Yer saw as how I couldn't go back on the man as paid me. I wanter tell yer one or two things afore I go."

"Go ahead and tell them."

"Ther first is, thet you are stackin' up against a big proposition down here. You come down here ter fix things fer Gonzales so's he could raise sheep."

"About that."

"Yer up agin' a company as has determined that he won't raise sheep."

"That's about what I thought."

"Then, ther story of ther White Death didn't fool yer none?"

"Not much."

"Well, when this here combine heard as how you was a-comin' here, they figgered thet ther ghost wouldn't skeer yer much. I guess as how they was right."

"And so they determined to make a prisoner of me in stead?"

"That's it."

"And they failed?"

"Yes; they failed; or, ruther, we failed. But I wanter tell yer one thing. That is thet yore best plan is ter quit this here business an' let it go. I'm yer friend from now on, an' I don't wanter see yer hurt. Yer stackin' up agin' a tough gang, an' the man what's at ther head of it wouldn't make no bones about sendin' a bullet through yer head."

"I don't doubt it."

"An' my advice ter yer is ter chuck up ther job an' get back ter U. S. A. as soon as ever yer can."

"Just what I don't intend to do."

"What does you care about this here Greaser and his sheep? Why should you risk yer neck fer him?"

"I promised to look into this thing. Besides that, I have some mining land of my own down here, and I intend to work it. If the country is in a lawless state, and people are afraid to go anywhere, I can't get labor for the mine. I'm going to clear up this ghost business before I go back."

"I kin tell from the cut of yer face thet yer won't give up. But I'm gol dinged glad I've given yer all the warnin' I could without breakin' my word."

"Thank you."

"An' yer won't pay no heed ter it?"

"I won't let it scare me out of the place."

"Well, I wish yer luck. Yer is too good a man ter be mixed up in this yere thing."

"Just what I said about you."

Horan hesitated.

"I'd like ter shake hands with yer afore I goes," he said.

"I'd like to shake hands with you," said the young rough rider.

They shook hands heartily, and without another word Horan turned and mounted his horse.

Ted watched him as he rode away, watched him until his form, with that of the animal he rode, disappeared over the top of one of the low hills that ran along the fords of the Rio.

"Well," he said, "there is one of this gang out of the way. I saw that I could never make him tell anything by force. I could see from his face that he was a decent sort of a fellow. I have made a friend of him, and he has told a lot more than I could get out of him by any other method. It is getting late, now, and I have learned enough for the present, at any rate. I won't ride out to the sheep farm. I'll ride straight back."

As the young rough rider mounted his animal, the sun was just beginning to dip behind the distant hills.

In another hour it would be pitch dark.

He was a considerable distance away from the ranch.

One would have supposed that the young rough rider would have been in a hurry.

Instead of that, he appeared to be in exactly the opposite frame of mind.

He did not urge his animal to go faster.

It was feeling lively and skittish after the long rest that it had received through the middle of the day, but when it tried to trot fast or break into a gallop, the young rough rider pulled it down to a walk and held it at it.

Making this sort of leisurely progress, the young rough rider was very late in getting back to the Las Palomas Ranch.

The sun sank lower and lower behind the lumpish western hills, and finally disappeared altogether in a glow of crimson and gold that held the eyes of the boy.

Gradually the bright colors faded.

The crimson became duller, the gold turned to pale yellow, then to a faint, rosy tinge.

Stars began to twinkle overhead.

It was night, and the light had died away in the west.

But still the young rough rider moved along at the most leisurely pace.

He was whistling a tune, as though he had no idea of getting home or to bed that night at all.

But with the slowest progress in the world, we will sometimes cover ground faster than we imagine.

It was a dark night, and the moon had not yet arisen, when the young rough rider came in sight of a cluster of lights that twinkled out of the darkness and marked the position of the Las Palomas Ranch.

The horse, scenting a feed of oats and a bed for the night, threw forward its ears and started ahead.

But the young rough rider's hand was firm on the rein.

He held it down to a walk, and finally brought it to a standstill, although it was very impatient to go on.

Ted glanced sharply about him on all sides.

Within a stone's throw were the ranch stables.

Ted could have turned the horse over to one of the men there and gone to bed without any further trouble, but he had other plans in his mind.

He turned his horse about suddenly and rode it back for a little in the direction in which it had come.

"I guess this will do all right," he muttered, dropping out of the saddle.

His actions up to this point had been hard to explain, but what he did now was still more puzzling.

He threw the bridle loose over the head of the horse, unbuckling it and disarranging it.

He tore a few shreds from his khaki coat—from the lining, where it was a little worn and loose.

These he fixed into some of the crevices and around the pommel of the saddle.

"Humph!" he muttered, examining it as well as he could in the darkness. "I guess that looks realistic enough."

He stepped back a little from the horse, and, snatching a handful of burrs out of a bush beside which he stood, he tossed them into the mane and the unclipped hair of the animal's hide.

The horse did not understand such treatment.

It frisked about and darted a step or two away from the young rough rider.

Ted did not attempt to stop it.

Instead, he hit it a smart clap with his open hand on the flank and let it go.

It needed no further urging.

Tossing its head into the air, it darted away with a wild snort.

Ted stood and watched it.

It was clouding up and growing dark, but the young rough rider's eyes were well trained to the gloom by this time.

He could make out the dark shape of the horse careening about over the prairie in big circles.

It was frightened and puzzled.

The young rough rider could hear the muffled thump of its hoofs as it galloped away among the prairie grass.

Presently it wheeled and came to a standstill.

Then it started straight for the ranch stables at a steady trot.

"That's the stuff," muttered the young rough rider. "I was afraid that it was not going to have sense enough to do that."

He crept closer to the ranch house after the horse.

It was quite dark, for the sky had been completely overcast by this time.

A tangle of chaparral and mesquite bush ran up very close to the ranch stables.

The young rough rider slipped into this, and made his way through it as silently as a wild beast could have done it.

Within earshot of the stable he came to a standstill.

Two or three Mexicans were hanging about there, and one of them was strumming soft chords on a guitar.

This stopped suddenly, and there were two or three exclamations of surprise in Spanish.

The riderless horse had just walked into the stall which it had occupied, and had been discovered by the *vaqueros.*

They were crowding around it, now, looking at the fragments of cloth on the saddle and the burrs that were tangled up in the long mane.

The young rough rider listened to their remarks with a smile on his face.

Then he turned and slipped silently away into the darkness.

CHAPTER VII.

GONZALES IS SURPRISED.

Señor Miguel Gonzales was sitting in the upper chamber of the Las Palomas Ranch that he called his office.

The night was dark, and the rain had begun to fall outside in a dull patter.

There was going to be a storm—a very rare thing in that section of the country, and the night was unusually hot and muggy.

Before the señor, hat in hand, stood the *secundo* of the ranch.

The *secundo* is the man who has authority next to the actual owner.

This *secundo* was a man of some intelligence.

He could speak English without an accent, although his face bore testimony to the fact that his blood was Mexican.

He was rather tall for one of his race, with powerful shoulders and without the pronounced bow legs that usually mar the figures of the *vaqueros.*

His eyes were a light color, an indeterminate shade between gray and blue, and his complexion was very swarthy.

He did not affect the gaudy dress that is usually the mark of the Mexican cattle man.

In attire he looked much more like an American rancher.

He was a trusted lieutenant of Gonzales.

The Mexican liked him for the strict discipline in which he held his men.

His men hated him for the cruelty and sternness with which he treated them.

He answered to the name of Pablo.

No one seemed to know anything about his birth or parentage.

He had come to the ranch a month or so before with recommendations from a friend of Gonzales.

He had received employment, and since then had proved himself such a hard worker and skillful handler of cattle and sheep that Gonzales considered him invaluable.

He had just made a report to the *ranchero* that had surprised the latter very much.

"What!" he said, "the young rough rider's horse come back without a rider! How long ago?"

"A moment or so. The *vaqueros* have but now reported it."

"What do you think is the matter."

"Perhaps the young man has fallen from the horse."

"He is the best rider I ever saw. He would stick on the back of a horse even in his sleep. He simply couldn't fall off."

"Perhaps the horse has thrown him."

"Bah! There isn't a horse on this ranch that could throw the young rough rider."

"Perhaps he has met with some one."

"Met with some one? What do you mean?"

"Foul play of some kind."

"Who would attempt such a thing?"

"I don't know. But the horse looked as if it had run hard. The buckle on the rein had been burst open, as though it had been pulled by some one who was being dragged from the saddle. There were pieces of brown cloth on the saddle, sticking to the edges."

Pablo held out a few shreds of khaki cloth.

Gonzales started to his feet when he saw them.

"Madre di dios!" he cried. "That is from the clothing

of the young rough rider. Something has happened to him. What can we do? If he disappears there will be a search for him, for he is well known in his own country. The United States Government will demand an explanation. I will be brought into bad repute, because he was my guest. I want no notice from the government while my present claim on those sheep lands is being contested. What can we do?"

"It is dark. The men are tired. There would be little use to search for him to-night."

"We cannot wait for morning! We must search for him! Get out your best men!"

"We can follow no trail in the dark."

"Start them for the sheep ranch. Go in that direction. That is the way that he went."

"Sí, señor."

"Hurry!"

Pablo clicked his heels together, bowed, waved his hat and marched out.

In the meantime his master was pacing up and down the room, his face and action showing the trouble and nervousness that the disappearance of the young rough rider had caused him.

The door banged after the *secundo,* and the *ranchero* heard his feet as he hurried down the stairs.

"This is terrible!" he said, half to himself and half aloud. "I do not know what to do at all. I thought that if anyone could stop this thing at the sheep farm, the young rough rider could do it. Everyone who has gone there has disappeared. Estevan was the last. Now comes the young rough rider. This will plunge me into additional trouble. The government will investigate. There will be trouble of all kinds. If the young rough rider were only here——"

"He will be there in about a second."

The voice was cheerful and pleasant.

It seemed to come from somewhere outside the window.

Gonzales stopped in his walk and gasped.

He could see a pair of hands grasping the window sill.

Nothing else except darkness.

"Madre di dios!" he cried. "What does this mean? Who spoke?"

"I did," came the voice from out the window.

It had struck the *ranchero* at first that some supernatural visitor had come to haunt him in a new way.

He staggered to the wall and grasped a chair for support.

"Just turn the key in your lock, and don't say a word. I'll explain. Lock the door."

Gonzales obeyed these last words without knowing that he had done so.

At the same instant the mosquito net at the window was broken inside and a figure climbed through.

It was that of a handsome boy, clad in rain-drenched khaki.

It was the young rough rider.

Gonzales gazed at it as though it were a ghost, and staggered back and back as the boy advanced into the room.

He thought that the young rough rider was dead, and that this was his ghost.

Although well-educated, he had a lot of superstition which he generally kept hidden.

He soon changed his opinion in regards to this ghost.

The young rough rider grasped his arm in a good, human, flesh-and-blood grip, and spoke to him in a voice that no ghost would have used.

"Steady, there!" he said, smiling a little. "This is I, in the flesh and blood. Don't be alarmed. Don't cry out, and don't be scared."

The touch of his hand did more to quiet the excited Mexican than the words.

He straightened up and stared.

Wonder rather than fear was written in his countenance now.

"What in the world!" he said.

"Nothing to be alarmed at," said the young rough rider. "I merely chose that way of coming in because it might attract less attention."

"But your horse—it came into the stable riderless."

"Just what I wanted it to do. It is a good horse."

"We thought that you had been wounded or killed."

"Just what I wanted you to think."

"And I have sent a party on your trail."

The young rough rider laughed.

"I fooled you all," he said. "The party will have a nice ride in the rain. I hope that they will find it pleasant."

Gonzales dropped into his chair and frowned at the young rough rider. After his fright was quite gone, he began to feel angry.

"Look here," he said. "I do not understand this sort of fooling on your part. You may think it a very clever trick to come climbing in my window. Were you thrown from your horse?"

"Not at all."

"What happened to you?"

"I had several adventures, and have discovered something."

"Did your horse run away from you?"

"No; I sent it in in that condition and walked after it."

"Well, I must say that I do not understand this sort of thing. If you think that the thing that you have just done is funny, you are mistaken. Perhaps you consider it as one of those things that you call practical jokes in your country."

The eyes of the Mexican were flashing, and it was clear that he was very angry.

"Look here," said Ted. "I want to assure you that I have not come down here to play practical jokes. I did what I did to-night for the purpose of giving the impression that I did not return to the ranch to-night."

"Why should you wish to give such an impression?"

"Because I think that there must be some one in this ranch house who acted the part of the ghost."

"There is no one in the ranch house whom I cannot trust. Pablo, the *secundo*, keeps a close watch on them all."

"And Pablo is trustworthy?"

"Perfectly so."

"Then there is some one here who is too clever for him. But we will not argue about that. I want you to let me run this investigation in my own way. I promise you that before I get through I will give you at least a clew as to how your shepherds disappeared and your sheep were slaughtered. Are you willing to let me go on? If not, I'll throw up the matter right away and leave the place to-morrow."

The young rough rider's manner was guarantee of the fact that he was in dead earnest, and that he was on the track of some explanation of the mystery.

The anger faded from the face of the *ranchero*.

He looked puzzled and a little apologetic.

"No, señor," he said. "You have been kind to come to my assistance in my trouble. I will allow you to go on in your own way. But I am curious."

"I know that. But I think that I will be able to satisfy your curiosity in a short time. In the meantime, I would like you to do just as I say."

"I am at your service."

"You remember that I had intended to sleep in that haunted room of yours to-night."

"Yes."

"I want you to do two things—or, rather, three. The first is to keep absolutely secret the fact that I have returned to the ranch house. Let it be thought that I was attacked on the prairie and lost there somehow. That was the impression that I intended to convey to your men."

"You succeeded in doing it. I will carry out your wishes in this matter. Not a soul shall know that you are here."

"And I wish to sleep in the haunted chamber as I arranged to this morning."

"That will be easy. You can slip down the stairs and into it without anyone seeing you."

"And I wish you to announce to some of your servants, so that it will be publicly known throughout the ranch, that you intend to sleep in the haunted chamber yourself."

"I can do that easily enough, but why——"

"Hush!" said the young rough rider.

There were footsteps on the stairs outside, and a moment later there was a knocking at the door.

With a warning look at Gonzales, the young rough rider stepped into a curtained alcove at one end of the room and allowed the curtain to drop behind him.

The *ranchero* went to the door and threw it open.

Pablo, the *secundo*, stepped inside.

"I have come to report," he said, "that I have started a party of five *vaqueros* out toward the sheep range. It was hard to get men to go. The night is stormy, and they are afraid of the White Death."

"But you got five to go. See that the men are well paid."

"I will."

"And Pablo, I intend to try and see this White Death myself to-night. I intend to sleep in the haunted chamber."

Ted Strong, peeping from behind the curtain, thought that he could discern the faint shadow of a smile on Pablo's face.

His master, however, did not notice it, and the *secundo* answered, in the most respectful manner:

"I shall call you at the usual hour?" he said.

"At the usual hour—good-night."

Pablo left the room, and after the young rough rider had heard his footsteps descending the stairs, he himself stepped out of his hiding place.

"I am much obliged to you for carrying out my requests so well," he said. "I was half afraid that you would not think to keep the matter a secret from your *secundo*."

"There was really no need to do so. He is perfectly trustworthy."

"Perhaps so; it is just a little whim of mine that no one shall know that I am in the *hacienda* to-night. And now, I want you to lend me one of your long cloaks and a hat."

"With pleasure, señor; here is my wardrobe, take your pick."

"I want those that you usually wear about the ranch here."

Gonzales selected a cloak and hat, and the young rough rider donned them.

"If you are going to sleep in the haunted chamber," said the Mexican, "you will want arms. Here are my weapons. They are carefully sighted. They have hair triggers. They were made in your United States, and are said to be the best that money can buy. I have found them reliable."

"Except when you shot at that ghost."

"But that was at the supernatural; you are a brave man to sleep in that chamber. I would not sleep in it once more for all the ranch."

Gonzales handed over a pair of silver-mounted revolvers, beautiful in design and workmanship.

The young rough rider thanked him for them.

"Now, I will go down to this haunted chamber," he said. "I know the way, for I have been there before. I want you to remain here, for I want everyone to think that it is you in the haunted chamber. Good-night."

"Good-night."

The young rough rider wrapped the folds of his cloak about him, pulled the hat down low over his eyes and strode out of the room.

He was about the same height as the owner of the haunted *hacienda,* although he was a good deal broader and heavier.

As he walked down the stairs and along the corridor to the haunted chamber, he imitated, as well as he could, the walk and carriage of Gonzales.

The hall was dimly lighted, and, wrapped in the cloak as he was, it would have been impossible to tell the young rough rider from the man he was trying to impersonate.

There was a dark figure lurking in the hall as Ted passed.

Ted was aware of it, but pretended not to see it.

It lurked there until the young rough rider entered the haunted chamber.

Then it slipped away.

It was Pablo.

On his face there was a smile of satisfaction.

CHAPTER VIII.

FACING THE WHITE DEATH.

The young rough rider would have liked to communicate with his friends, Bud Morgan and Ben Tremont, who he knew were somewhere in the ranch house.

They must have heard that his horse had come back riderless.

But Ted had already talked to them as to what his plans were, and he had confidence that they would carry out the part that he had assigned to them to play.

Ted knew that any attempt to see anyone or any effort to communicate with his friends at that moment could result only in his discovery.

This would spoil his plan and make worthless all the pains and trouble that he had taken.

His first act on entering the haunted chamber was to lock the door and pull down all the blinds, so that no one could possibly see into the room.

His second was to sit down on the bed and take out the pair of weapons that the Mexican had loaned to him for his protection during the night.

"Nice-looking pair of guns," he muttered, throwing open the locks and looking at the loads. "But if I am not mistaken, they are better at the present moment for looks than they are for use."

He emptied the cartridges on the bed and looked at them.

"Just what I thought," he muttered, as he picked up one after the other and looked at them.

There were no bullets in the cartridges, and as the young rough rider looked at them more closely, he could see that there was only a few grains of powder in each one.

"Nobody would get hurt with these cartridges," he said. "Gonzales says that he can trust everyone in the ranch house. He has trusted some one a little too far. That is why he shot at the ghost the last time it appeared without producing any effect on it. If the White Death shows up in this chamber to-night—and I rather think that it will—it may find a different sort of a reception from the last time that it appeared. Now I guess that I will lay these beautiful but harmless weapons to one side, where they can ornament the room."

Laying them on a shelf, the young rough rider drew forth his own weapons and looked at them.

They were of a widely different pattern from those that the *ranchero* had loaned him.

They were destitute of silver plate or ornamentation of any kind.

The polished steel barrels were fully an inch longer than those of the other revolvers.

The stock was not of pearl, but of hard, black rubber vulcanite.

They had been made especially to fit the hand of the young rough rider.

They had not been constructed with any eye to the looks of the thing.

They were built with the idea of throwing a heavy bullet straight and hard, and they embodied all the young rough rider's ideas of revolver building. They were hammerless, and the trigger was arranged on a system that the young rough rider had devised himself.

One touch of the finger would put them at the half cock. Another would fire the weapons.

The young rough rider broke them open and examined the charges.

Every cartridge was in good condition.

Every one held a long, leaden bullet and the proper load of smokeless powder behind it.

The young rough rider slipped the loads back into the weapons, and laid them on the pillow.

Then he removed his spurs and hat, and put out the light that burned on a table at his hand.

He climbed into the bed, but arranged the blankets in such a way that he could leap out of the bed at an instant's notice without being encumbered by them.

His last act was to lean forward and draw up the blind at the window.

Then he threw himself back on the couch, and apparently was lost in repose.

His hands were concealed underneath the blankets, but each of them clutched at the butt of his revolvers, which he had thrust loosely into his belt, so that they could be easily drawn forth.

He lay there as still as though he had been actually sleeping.

Outside the rain pattered and the thunder rumbled in the distance.

A few horses could be heard stamping about in the stables.

Some of the men who had been out on the search for the young rough rider had returned to the ranch.

They were tired out, and they talked to each other in Spanish as they unsaddled their dripping horses and put them up for the night.

The young rough rider could hear the drowsy rumble of their voices, although he could not distinguish the words that they were saying.

He knew that Ben Tremont and Bud Morgan were not among them.

He would have recognized their voices in an instant, and, besides that, he was sure that his friends were busy about other work.

For a while the men muttered and stumbled about in the stable near at hand.

Then, one by one, they tramped to their sleeping quarters, their spurs jingling musically.

The horses still made some disturbance.

They champed and kicked about in their stalls for a little before they lay down for the night.

Then they, too, became silent.

There was nothing to be heard now save the pattering of the rain.

Presently this also died away.

The storm had passed, and the clouds were rolling back, allowing the stars to appear in the sky.

The moon was rising from behind the eastern hills.

The young rough rider could see plainly out of his window, which opened to the eastward.

He could see a silver rift appearing in the dark clouds.

He could see the rift growing wider and wider.

The clouds rolled back altogether.

A stiff east wind had sprung up, and they were flying before it.

Out shone the moon in all its glory.

It shone upon great cloud banks, and turned them to hills of silver.

As the young rough rider lay there, he thought that he had never seen a lovelier or more beautiful sight.

The space of clear blue out of which the pale moon shone was growing larger.

Out of it shone golden stars, not twinkling as they do in clear, frosty atmospheres, but shining softly and luminously, with a clear, ethereal radiance beyond description in its beauty.

Absolute silence reigned all around. The ranch house was asleep, and the animals in the stables were all asleep.

It seemed as if the moon had arisen to bless them as they slept.

The young rough rider was admiring the beauty of the moonrise, but he was thinking of other things also.

He was on the alert for any sound.

He had a pretty good idea that the White Death would appear to him that night.

He knew that, after its unsuccessful attempt to scare the *ranchero* out of his sheep farming, it would come again.

This time it might do more than talk.

One herdsman after the other had disappeared mysteriously.

Ted had calculated that there might have been a plan to make Gonzales himself disappear in the same manner.

He was there for the purpose of seeing how these disappearances were effected, and he was on his guard.

Ted, in telling of this night's experiences later on, has often said that he did not believe that he actually slept.

He was tired out, and he may have closed his eyes for a moment.

He may have dozed off, but it could only have been for a few minutes, at the very most.

When he opened them, he opened them with a start.

A queer shiver had passed through his whole body.

There had been no sound that made him open his eyes.

The silence was absolute.

But he felt as if a warning hand had been laid upon him, bidding him to be on his guard, that the time had come.

What he saw would have frightened many out of their wits.

There, before him, was the White Death!

He had heard descriptions of it, and he knew that its appearance must be terrifying, but he had had no idea that the vision, or whatever it was, could have appeared so unreal and ghostlike as it did now.

It stood between him and the window, bathed in the moonbeam that fell across the floor.

At first it seemed that the thing was part of the moon beam—it had the same white radiance and luminosity.

It seemed as if a number of the white particles that you can see floating in any beam of light had gathered together, and formed themselves into this specter.

Every line, every feature was plain and clear. There was the slouched hat, with the drooping feather falling over one side. There was the face, every feature of it plain and distinct.

It looked like the face of some ancient Spanish grandee.

It had a hooked nose, a drooping mustache, a well-formed mouth, which was twisted into a cruel and cynical smile.

There was the long, Spanish cloak, that draped the form down to the heels in long, graceful folds.

It seemed to be made of woven silver.

The whole form was far above the ordinary dimensions of man.

It towered up till the top of the sombrero almost brushed against the ceiling.

Its shoulders seemed twice the span of those of a large man.

It stood there, upright and silent, looking at the young rough rider.

Its eyes were not of a gleaming white, like the rest of it.

They were dark, but they seemed ablaze with a sort of fire.

They were turned upon the form of the young rough rider, and the boy felt as if they could see through and through him.

Ted had been prepared to see something strange and horrible, but no amount of preparation could have made this seem anything but a haunting spirit from the lower regions.

In spite of all his courage, in spite of all his cool sense and experience, he lay back on the bed for a moment, absolutely powerless to move.

The White Death seemed to have chilled the air in the room, and the young rough rider felt as if that chill had struck into his very heart.

For a moment the White Death gazed at him in silence.

Then it reached forth a white, lean hand and touched him on the foot.

Ted feared the touch of that hand, but when it did touch him, his fear and wonder left him suddenly.

It was made of flesh and blood.

There was no doubt about that.

The young rough rider did not stir.

"Awake," said the specter, in low, hollow tones, "awake at the call of the White Death. Awake!"

The young rough rider stirred slightly, and moved his head so that it was in the shadow.

He wanted to show that he was awake, but he did not want to show that he was other than the *ranchero*.

He was afraid to trust himself to speak, not being confident of his ability to imitate the voice of Gonzales sufficiently well to deceive the listener.

His movement was sufficient.

The specter dropped its hand and spoke again, after a short pause.

"Miguel Gonzales," it said, "your day has come. You have defied the White Death. You were warned, and you did not take the warning. You sent for the young rough rider. He is dead. Your hour has come."

The answer to this was a sharp click-click that came from the bed.

It was the click of two revolvers.

They were pointed directly at the head of the White Death.

At the same time the young rough rider was using his eyes, trying to find out how this ghost had entered the apartment.

It had not been through the window.

The netting that was stretched across it made that out of the question.

The young rough rider could not see the floor from where he lay without raising his head.

He did not wish to do that, but he felt confident that there was an opening there of some kind.

The White Death laughed a hollow laugh at the sound of the revolvers.

"Fire!" it said. "You have fired at the White Death before now. You know that mortal bullets cannot affect it. Fire again, if you will."

Ted sighted both of his weapons for the head of the specter.

Then he changed his aim a little.

He felt sure that this was some person, masquerading, and he could not bear to shoot him dead.

He aimed at one shoulder and pulled the trigger.

There was a flash of fire from the muzzle and a deafening crash.

The White Death staggered back, and at the same time a shrill yell of anguish came from its lips.

The young rough rider fired with his other weapon.

He raised himself in the bed, and aimed lower this time.

The White Death swayed.

Then it collapsed in a queer way to half its height.

It toppled and shrunk seemingly.

The luminous white garments flapped about, as though they had been filled with an air bubble, which the bullets of the young rough rider had punctured.

Ted rose half from the bed, but at the same time there was a rush of feet on one side of him.

Two figures darted forward.

A hand grasped at each of his wrists.

As the White Death sank into a shapeless heap on the floor, another figure dashed forward out of the darkness somewhere, and struck the boy a crashing blow between the eyes with the butt of a revolver.

It stunned the young rough rider, but still he struggled and tried to fire his weapons.

Six pairs of hands had hold of him.

Three dark figures threw their weight on him.

He did not know where they came from.

They had appeared suddenly out of the darkness, and

he was fighting hand-to-hand with them before he knew what had happened.

He still fought, but for the moment the blow that he had received on the forehead had confused him and had taken his strength from him.

He rolled off the bed on the floor with a crash, the three figures still keeping hold of him and throwing their weight upon him as he fell.

He landed on his face on the floor, and with that weight on his back was powerless to rise.

He received a heavy blow on the back of his head.

A thousand stars danced before his eyes.

Such a struggle, so unequal, could not last long.

The strength was going from the young rough rider.

One of the weapons was twisted out of his hand.

It was brought down on his head with stunning force.

There was a great ringing in his ears now, and a sound as of rapidly rushing water.

He felt his senses leaving him.

His body lay quivering and inert.

Two more blows landed on his head.

He trembled from head to heels, and then lay quite still.

He was senseless.

The three figures that had been holding him drew back.

They were masked, but they looked at each other through eyeholes in the masks.

"I had no idea that this Greaser could put up such a fight," said one.

"He is strong," said another. "He has fired at Bill and hurt him."

"I changed the charges in his weapons. I do not understand it," said the third.

Had the young rough rider heard that voice, he would have recognized it.

It was that of Pablo, the *secundo*.

"Go to Bill," continued the *secundo*. "Get him down out of this. See how badly he is hurt. We will get Gonzales out of the way."

The moonbeams showed that there was a large trapdoor open in the middle of the floor.

A faint gleam of yellow light, as from a lantern, came from beneath it.

The young rough rider had not been able to see this from his position on the bed.

One of the men dashed to the heap of white that lay where the White Death had fallen to the earth.

The other two raised the unconscious form of the young rough rider in their arms, and carried it to the trapdoor.

Below it could be seen a sort of steep stairway or ladder, leading into some compartment and cellar beneath.

The young rough rider was carried down here.

At the same time the other fellow raised a form half swathed in white cloth from the ground, and carried it over to the trapdoor.

There was a noise of running feet in the hallway outside.

The shots had aroused all in the house, and there was a knocking at the outside.

The men hurried down the ladder with their burdens.

The trapdoor over their heads closed.

The room where the White Death had appeared was left in silence and emptiness.

The door was burst open a moment later.

Gonzales and a number of his men rushed in, bearing lights.

They found nothing there.

CHAPTER IX.

BELOW THE RANCH HOUSE.

"Well, now that we have Gonzales a prisoner, what shall we do with him?"

"I'm in favor of slitting his throat. Dead men tell no tales."

The young rough rider was lying on his back in some kind of a dark cellar.

He was still wrapped in the cloak of Gonzales which he had borrowed, but a cord had been passed around his ankles, tying them together securely.

Beside him were sitting two men.

One of them was Pablo, the *secundo*. The other was a rough-looking fellow whom the young rough rider had never seen before.

Between them was a lantern which shed a light over their faces and forms.

So far as the young rough rider could see into the shadows on all sides of him, he was in some kind of a big cellar.

He came to the conclusion that he was under the ranch house, and later on he discovered that this supposition was correct.

Pablo was the man who had just uttered the remark about dead men telling no tales.

"I was correct in suspecting that fellow," thought the young rough rider. "They do not know who I am as yet. They think that I am Gonzales. They think that I am unconscious. I may learn something more from their conversation."

The young rough rider lay perfectly still, and listened with all his ears.

"Gonzales has defied us," went on Pablo. "If he should escape, he would get after me. There would be no further chance to work for him. He would find out the whole game."

"I don't like the idea of killing a man," said the other.

"Pshaw! Why shouldn't he die? He is not the only one that will have to die. The young rough rider is a prisoner. If he is not dead already, he must die when I get to our cave down near the sheep ranch."

"The young rough rider—are you sure that he is a prisoner?"

"He must be. I left Horan and two others in an ambush to wait for him. I heard that he had gone out toward the sheep ranch. I had the men posted. He has disappeared, as did the sheep herders whom Gonzales sent out there."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure! His horse came back riderless, with evidence of a struggle showing in its saddle. The young rough

rider is either dead or a prisoner in our place up there in the hills."

"Humph!" muttered Ted, under his breath. "I am your prisoner, but I am not up in the hills, by any means."

"Why can't we put Gonzales in the cave there, with the rest of them?" said Pablo's companion, after a short pause.

"There is no reason why we could not do it," said Pablo. "It would be easy enough to do it. But in taking this *ranchero* into our power we have done a very serious thing. We could not keep him always in the cave. There would always be the risk of his escaping. Remember the saying—dead men tell no tales."

"I know that, but still, I do not like murder."

"Look here, Jim Haro," said Pablo. "We went into this business for the purpose of keeping the sheep men off the ranges."

"Yes, we did."

"And we were to be prepared to do it any way we could."

"Yes; but when I went into this game I thought that it would be a much simpler matter than it is. I thought that the ghost that we rigged up would easily scare the shepherds off the range. But it did not work so well, perhaps, as I might have expected."

"No. It did not, perhaps. But we cannot back out of this now. You are as deeply implicated in this as I am. We have two prisoners—the young rough rider and this rancher. The sooner they are out of the way the better. They would hunt us down; eventually they would try to run us down. There is no other way out of it."

"I'd prefer to chuck the whole thing at once."

"Too late to do that. You know that I am in the business up to the teeth. You are in it as well as I am. We started out with the idea of frightening away the shepherds. We thought that we could get Gonzales out of there in that way."

"But you didn't."

"No, we didn't. Instead of that, he grew all the more determined. He is our prisoner now, and he must not escape. That sheet covered with phosphorous and with the white makes an attire that would deceive most people. I thought that it would scare Gonzales as well as it did the herdsmen. When Ross puts it on, with a pair of stilts under it and phosphorus smeared all over it——"

"Yes; it didn't seem to fool him, though. He fired at him."

"That is what I cannot understand. I had drawn the charges from his revolver. I thought that, even if he did fire, he could do no harm."

"He did harm. Ross has one bullet wound across the top of his head. A little lower, and it would have gone clean through his head and killed him. Then there is another wound in his shoulder."

"I know, I know. I cannot understand it. We are in this thing to the bitter end. We are in it to the death. Gonzales must die."

"Do you think that there is no chance of our place down here being discovered?"

"Not the faintest. I fastened the trapdoor. It holds so well that it cannot be told from the planks around it that have been nailed down. Then I have just been upstairs. The others, except one or two whom I can trust, are thinking that I am out searching for Gonzales. The whole place is in confusion. One man told me that Gonzales was leading a hunt after the White Death," Pablo broke into a laugh. "I knew where Gonzales was—safe and sound, down here—but you may be sure that I did not tell him. When they do not even know yet that their master is missing, you may be sure that they are too excited to find where we are, or to do us any damage if they did find us. But we will have to knock Gonzales on the head. We cannot afford to keep him a prisoner. How is Ross getting on?"

Another member of the three men who had thrown themselves on the young rough rider stepped up at this moment.

It was to him that Pablo spoke.

He answered in a voice that Ted recognized as belonging to one of the *vaqueros*.

"He is better," he said. "I have been helping him to his cabin. He has one bad wound in his shoulder—the other is slight, although a little lower, and it would have killed him."

The young rough rider listened to this with a good deal of interest.

"There must be some way leading up from here to the outer air," he thought. "And that is an interesting fact about the fellow that played the White Death. He has been doing it well to fool so many people for so long a time. But it will be easy to find him now. I will tell Gonzales to find one of his men who has a bullet graze along his head and a wound in his shoulder. That will be the White Death, and a part of the mystery, at least, will be solved."

"What is going on upstairs?" asked Pablo. "Did you notice anything as you came back down here."

"There is a whole lot going on. Gonzales is up there, ripping up things in great shape. He is looking for you——"

"Gonzales! He is here!"

"He is up there. I saw him with my own eyes."

"He is here. We took him down with us. He was the fellow in the bed."

"Look and see."

Pablo stepped forward, bending over the young rough rider and drawing back the cloak that half covered his face.

He held the lantern in his hand so that its rays fell on the boy.

Ted had been expecting this moment for some time.

He had been waiting for it and preparing for it.

The men who had captured him had left him bound as to the feet, but they had not tied his hands.

While they were talking, the young rough rider, whom they thought unconscious, was busy tugging at the knots and trying to get them loose.

He succeeded, too, and when Pablo leaned over him, although the cords were apparently as tight as ever, the young rough rider was really free of his bonds.

Pablo caught one glimpse of his face, and uttered a yell of surprise.

It was the face that he expected to see least of any.

He thought that the young rough rider was being held as a prisoner at a point ten or fifteen miles away from there.

He had not the slightest idea that his prisoner was other than Gonzales, his employer.

Ted took advantage of his surprise.

With one spring he was on his feet.

He cast a single glance around the place.

It was evidently a cellar under the ranch house.

There was a tunnel dug in the earth on one side.

It led out to the upper air.

The young rough rider saw this, as, with a sweeping movement of his hand, he struck the lantern that Pablo carried and hurled it to the ground.

The other two men who were standing beside Pablo dashed at him, but the light was out, and the cellar was in darkness before they could reach him.

As they came for him, the young rough rider ducked to one side.

Each man caught at the other in the darkness.

Each thought that the man that he had caught was the young rough rider.

Each fought savagely, and as they were well matched, the fight that went on in the dark was something that would have been worth seeing if it had been visible.

As Ted had darted away, he had struck Pablo a blow in the face and sent him staggering.

It was pitchy dark after the lantern went out, but before striking his blow, the young rough rider had been careful to notice the position of the tunnel that he had seen leading out of the cellar.

He dashed in that direction, and Pablo went after him, calling at the others to follow.

He was quicker than his two men, and had already divined what the plan of the young rough rider was.

Ted reached the entrance to the tunnel with Pablo at his heels.

As he started up it, he found that it was low and narrow.

It was harder running in that place than he had expected it to be.

It ran up a steep incline, and the bottom was strewn with loose rock and bowlders.

Pablo was much better used to traveling by this path than the young rough rider himself.

He came along at a brisk pace.

Ted could feel him through the darkness, right behind him.

He made a great effort to get out of the way, and stumbled over a stone.

Down he went in a heap.

At the same time Pablo threw himself upon him from behind.

He grasped at the young rough rider's throat, and caught it in a grip that cut off Ted's breathing and made him gasp and choke.

Ted gripped at his throat, and the two fought in that black hole with the fury of madmen.

Pablo had the upper hand.

His knee was planted on the chest of the young rough rider, and he bore him down with all his weight.

At the same time other footsteps sounded up the tunnel.

The two men who had rushed at Ted had discovered their mistake, and were coming to the assistance of their leader.

One of them had lit the lantern again, and as he came closer, its rays illuminated the scene inside the tunnel.

It was as wild a scene as could be painted by the most imaginative artist.

The tunnel was a bare six feet high, and it ascended toward the upper ground at a steep slope.

It was cut through the earth with pick and shovel, and the walls of clay shone in the light with thousands of points of mica, which gleamed like gold.

In the middle of the tunnel, Pablo and the young rough rider were struggling hand to hand.

Ted was evidently getting the worst of it.

Pablo had seized him by the throat, and seemed to be choking the life out of him.

Ted was making no apparent effort to resist.

But as the others came up with the lantern, there was a change in the situation.

A deafening report rang out, and the narrow tunnel was filled with choking smoke.

Pablo gave a wild yell and rolled over on his side.

The young rough rider half rose, and looked at the three who were attacking him.

In his hand there was a revolver, which he had managed to draw from Pablo's belt while they were struggling.

It was in his anxiety to do this that the young rough rider had allowed his opponent to get a slight advantage.

Now the young rough rider was able to sweep the tunnel with his weapon.

He had shot Pablo through the arm.

The big Mexican lay on the ground, groaning.

Behind his prostrate form crouched his two followers, one of them holding the lamp.

Neither of them had drawn a weapon, and the young rough rider had them covered.

They were both afraid to reach for the revolvers that hung at their belts.

The barrel of that revolver seemed pointed at the two of them at once.

Each man felt as if it were directed especially at him.

Each felt that at the first movement on his part, the young rough rider would fire.

They recognized him now, and thought of his wonderful reputation as a dead shot.

They stood still there, as if turned to stone, the boy being the master of the situation.

CHAPTER X.

AT BAY.

"Hands up!" said the young rough rider. "Quick, or I fire!"

There was a ring in his voice that meant business.

The men knew him by reputation.

Their hands went into the air in the twinkling of an eye.

Pablo still lay on the ground where he had fallen.

The shot that he had received through the arm had stunned him.

He groaned and stirred, but he did not seem in the possession of his senses.

The others felt that they were without a leader.

They stood there with their hands in the air, pale and white, not knowing what to do.

The young rough rider rose to his feet, still facing them, and still keeping his weapon sweeping from one to the other of them.

He reached forward, and snatched the lantern from the hands of the one who carried it, and who was holding it in the air above his head.

Slipping the wire by which he was suspended over his wrist, he reached forward and disarmed the two men in the twinkling of an eye, thrusting the revolvers which he took from them in his own belt.

All the while he kept looking steadily into their eyes, never shifting his gaze for a moment, and never wavering in his aim.

With their revolvers in his belt, he breathed a little more freely, but he knew that he was still in a tight hole.

He did not know where the tunnel led to, although he had formed the idea that it communicated with one of the cabins that were occupied by the *vaqueros* employed on the ranch.

He began to back slowly away from the men.

They stood stock-still.

When he was about ten feet away from them, he spoke to them.

"I am going to back my way out of this tunnel," he said, "and I am going to keep you covered at the same time. At the first sign of an attempt to rush, I will fire. I won't fire once. I will keep on firing until every chamber in this revolver has been emptied. By that time the two of you will have a considerable amount of lead in you. That's what you will get if you try to rush at me. Understand?"

"We understands," said one of the men, hoarsely.

"I am glad that you do. You cannot understand it too well for your own good. As I back up out of this tunnel, I want you to follow me. Understand that?"

"Yes."

"I want you to move forward just as fast as I move backward, and no faster. If you go faster, I will fire. If you go slower, I will fire. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

"If you turn or try to run away, I will fire. If you lower your hands by the space of an inch, I'll fire. If you make any move at all, except to walk slowly forward, I'll fire. If I do fire, I'll shoot you both through the head, and put the other bullets into your body. I am at bay here, and I am going to take no chances."

The revolver of the young rough rider clicked.

Both the men winced, as though they expected a shot.

Ted smiled grimly.

"You hear that," he said. "The gun is just ready to go off. I can't miss you at this distance. A touch of my finger——"

"For Heaven's sake, pard, let up!" said one of the men, as pale as a sheet. "We'll do anything that yer say."

"All right. Now I am going to start out. Where does this tunnel lead to?"

"Up ter one of ther cabins."

"Which one?"

"Ther one thet Sandy Ross lives in."

"Is he the fellow that was masquerading as a ghost?"

"Yes."

"And he's lying there now, with a bullet through him?"

"Yes."

"All right. Now we start. Climb over the body of your friend there. We have no time to wait for him."

The young rough rider started backward up the tunnel.

His position was even more perilous than he had imagined at first.

The tunnel was so narrow that he could not allow the men to pass him unless they came very close to him.

He did not want to do this, for he knew that this would give them a chance to grab at his revolver and grapple with him.

He had to move backward in order to keep them covered.

Moving backward, he would enter the cabin in which Ross was lying.

If there was anyone else with Ross, or if the man who had been acting the part of the White Death was able to draw a weapon, the young rough rider would stand a good chance of getting a bullet in the back.

It was out of the frying pan into the fire, but there was nothing else for it.

Pablo might recover his wits at any moment, and that would make a third man that he would have to stand off.

Besides, the *secundo* might have other confederates, and Ted wanted to get out of there before he met with any of them.

As he backed slowly away, the other two followed him at exactly the same rate of speed.

The boy had the ability to control them with his eyes.

They had no thought of disobeying his commands.

Ted moved very slowly.

The tunnel sloped sharply upward for a little, and then turned to the right.

As he passed along, the young rough rider could see a section of a wall through which the tunnel had been driven.

It was made of ancient, solid masonry, great blocks of stone firmly set in hard cement.

Several of these had been moved out, to make the opening through which the tunnel passed.

The young rough rider decided that this was the foundation wall of the ranch house.

He knew what side of the house it must be, for in spite of all his adventures, he had preserved a general sense of direction.

To fall would mean death.

The young rough rider felt sure that if he slipped, the two men whom he was facing would spring upon him.

He could read the desire to do so in their tigerish eyes.

The ground was rough, sharp stones sticking out of it, and here and there there were piles of clay, over which it would be very easy to tumble.

The young rough rider could not look behind him to see which way he was going.

If he turned his head, it would give an opening for his adversaries.

He dared not take his eyes from them for an instant.

Moving backward in this fashion, he made slow progress.

He passed each foot carefully behind him, and felt about with it on the ground before he made a step.

The tunnel sloped higher and higher, and the roof came lower and lower, so that he was forced to duck his head to avoid some of the inequalities in it.

In this fashion the trio moved along the tunnel, the swinging lantern that Ted held in one hand casting its light upon them and about the damp clay walls of the place, the revolver gleaming and steady in the other hand of the young rough rider.

It was hot and almost stifling in the place.

The air was close and foul.

Perspiration streamed down Ted's face and down the faces of the two men who were marching stolidly after him.

Pablo, lying on the floor of the tunnel, had been left far behind and out of sight by this time.

Ted felt that he must be coming close under the cabin where the tunnel had its opening.

He moved slower and slower.

Not a word was spoken.

There was no sound save the steady shuffle of six feet as the three moved along, and the occasional splash of a drop of water as it fell from the damp earth and rock of the roof.

Ted came to a standstill.

His back was against something.

It was the end of the tunnel.

He could feel the uprights and rungs of a ladder against his back.

He dared not look around.

He felt that the most perilous time had come now.

He raised the hand with the lantern in it.

He could touch the low roof without any trouble.

He felt the boards instead of clay over his head now.

He did not look up, but ran his hand along the boards, which he felt sure were part of the flooring of the cabin above.

He found an opening in the boards.

His hand went right through it, out into fresher and cooler air.

The opening was directly over the ladder which led up at his back.

It was a moment when the coolest man in the world might have hesitated and lost his nerve.

He was facing two men who might spring upon him the instant that he turned his back.

He was about to go up into a room where he would run into more enemies.

He stood looking at the men for a moment, but he soon decided what he would do.

Without the faintest warning, without a move to indicate what his action would be, he dashed the lantern on the ground, so that it went out at once.

He wheeled in the darkness, grasped the rungs of the ladder, and started up.

At the same time the two others divined what he was doing, and dashed at him in the dark.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIGHT IN THE CABIN.

Ted had been quick, but the two men had also been quick.

They had lost their fear and surprise at finding the young rough rider, whom they had thought a prisoner far away, in the place where they expected to find Gonzales.

Pablo, their leader, had barely time to see that it was not the *ranchero* when he was shot and left senseless.

These men had plenty of time to think over it, and they had each come to the determination that the young rough rider, however he had got there, must not escape from their hands.

They were waiting until Ted reached the ladder, knowing that that would be the proper time to rush him.

They knew how foolhardy it would be to dash at the weapon of such a splendid shot, but they also knew that the young rough rider would be forced to turn his attention from them when he tried to climb the ladder out of the tunnel.

They had the advantage of knowing the lay of the land, and how the tunnel ended.

Ted had been forced to guess or discover all this for himself while he moved backward, at the same time keeping his eyes fixed on them.

At the moment when Ted dashed his lantern to the ground, they had both conceived the idea of leaping upon him.

They jumped forward like two wild cats, and grasped at the ladder.

Ted was halfway up it, and had his head out in a room above.

They caught him by the legs, and tried to drag him down.

His hold slipped. He came down a rung or so, but caught at another.

Then came a terrible strain, the men below trying to drag him down, the young rough rider holding onto the ladder like grim death.

He could not use his revolver. The moment that he let go with one of his hands, he would be torn from the ladder.

He fought one foot free and kicked savagely. It landed on something with a soft thud.

It was the face of one of the men. He did not even cry out. The heel had landed in the middle of his face with terrible force, smashing his nose and lips.

He let go his hold.

Ted swung his foot again. This time it landed on the fellow's head. He fell to the earth without a sound. The last kick that he had received was enough to stun an ox.

There was only one man to fight now, but he was strong and active.

He climbed upon the ladder beside the young rough rider, and tried to draw one of the weapons from his belt.

"Help!" he yelled. "Come, Bill, lend us a hand with this fellow."

"I'll lend you a hand," said the young rough rider. "There it is. How do you like it?"

He hit the fellow a smash on the jaw and knocked him from the ladder.

Before he could get up, the young rough rider made a wild leap, and was in the place above. He could see at a glance that it was the interior of a log cabin.

It was lit with a lantern hung from the ceiling.

There were two men in it. One of them was sitting in a chair, with his arm done up in bandages. The other was in the act of rushing for the trapdoor.

He had just heard the call from his friend below.

The young rough rider met him halfway.

As he rushed forward, he struck out and caught him on the point of the jaw.

It lifted the fellow clear from his feet.

He was hurled backward, and landed in a heap in the corner.

Ted turned and went for the fellow with the bandaged arm.

This was Ross, the man who had acted the White Death.

The clothes that he had worn, smeared with phosphorus, lay on a chair near by.

As the young rough rider came for him, he drew a revolver and fired full in his face.

Ted dodged, and the bullet sung over his head.

He ran in and dragged the weapon out of the man's hand.

At the same time two other figures appeared from the trapdoor.

One of them was Pablo, who had recovered consciousness. He was bleeding from his wound, but his strength seemed unimpaired.

His companion was the fellow that the young rough rider had knocked from the ladder.

They leaped at the young rough rider like two wild cats.

Pablo carried a revolver in his hand, and brought it down on the young rough rider's head.

He fell to the floor, and the two piled on top of him.

He was lying on his face, in a position in which it was hard to struggle.

"Rope!" hissed Pablo, doing his best to hold him down. "This is not Gonzales, but the young rough rider. I do not know how he came here. Rope!"

Ross tossed a coil of rope out and threw it about the young rough rider.

The man whom Ted had kicked dashed into the room now.

He had recovered consciousness, but he was a sight.

There was a lump the size of an egg on his forehead, and his nose was smashed and bleeding. He was gritting his teeth together, and he flung himself upon the young rough rider with the fury of a fiend.

There was little chance for Ted now.

They were all piled on top of him, and the rope had already entangled his limbs, and was drawing tighter and tighter about him.

The struggle lasted but a moment longer.

Then Ted was lying on his back, bound hand and foot, gazing into the savage faces of his captors.

They were all panting and out of breath. Not one of them but did not show some trace of the struggle that they had gone through.

The young rough rider had left his token on every one of them.

They had all recovered consciousness, but they all were sore still from the rough handling that Ted had given them.

One had a broken nose, one a bullet through his shoulder, another a bullet in his arm. The man Ted had struck when he dashed in the room had a split lip, and still looked sick as a result of the punch on the jaw that he had received.

There were five of them altogether.

There was Pablo and the two men who had fought with the young rough rider in the tunnel. Then there was Ross, the wounded man, and his companion.

They all drew back, and looked at the young rough rider in silence.

Ted glanced around the cabin.

It was heavily built and had no window. The great door was barred top and bottom, and the whole place looked as strong as a fort.

There was another door, that seemed to open into another room in the cabin.

Pablo stood glaring at the young rough rider as he lay on the floor.

"We have you at last!" he muttered.

"So it seems," said Ted.

"And you will never escape from our hands this time."

The young rough rider said nothing.

He wanted to let his captor do most of the talking. Pablo waited a moment for the young rough rider to speak. None of the other men offered to say a word.

They were evidently under the leadership of Pablo, and afraid of him.

As Ted looked at them he could see that not one of them were Mexicans.

They looked like cattle men and border ruffians from over in Texas.

"Well," said Pablo, at length. "I suppose you know that I am going to kill you?"

"I know that you won't do anything of the sort."

"Why not?"

"You fear the punishment for it."

"I would never be discovered," said Pablo, with a scornful laugh. "You know too much. You know the secret of the White Death."

"I know how you rigged up a ghost to frighten the Greasers with. I see how it was worked now."

"It was you who slept in the haunted chamber."

"You ought to know that by this time."

"Your riderless horse, that you sent home, was a bluff. You are clever."

"Thank you."

"But there are some things that I cannot understand."

"Doubtless."

"I laid an ambush for you. I heard you were going to ride out to the sheep ranch. How did you escape it?"

"I see no reason why I should answer that question, but I will do so if you answer me one in return."

"What is it?"

"Who hired you fellows to do this work of scaring Gonzales out of raising sheep?"

"I might as well answer that. You know so much already. You will never leave here alive, so it will do you no good to know. It was Crane, the Texas cattle man."

"He has a claim on that ground, and is suing Gonzales for it in the courts?"

"Yes."

"And he hired you to try to get the papers in the case out of Gonzales—that is why he has been missing things out of his desk. He also hired you to rig up some sort of a game to frighten the Mexicans."

"The land would be useless in another year for cattle if sheep grazed on it, and Crane felt that he would win his case in the end."

"And determined to keep the sheep off it by fair means or foul."

"I have talked enough. Tell me how you came here."

"I met your men and got away from them. Then I came back here, and got into the house without your seeing me. That was part of my plan."

Pablo looked at the young rough rider in silence for a little while.

"You are the cleverest young man I have ever seen," he said. "But you must die. You know too much."

He turned to his men. At his glance, they gathered about him.

"Take him into the next room," he said. "Hang him there. Drop him down the trapdoor. He is the only man we need fear. The Mexicans are frightened to death."

The fellows crowded about the young rough rider, and were about to lift him to his feet when Ted spoke again.

He had just heard his doom, but it did not seem to effect his nerves in the least.

"Before you start into this hanging business," he said. "I have something to say to you. It will interest you. It will not take me long."

"Speak!" said Pablo. "But do not ask for mercy. That will be a waste of breath."

"I am not going to ask for mercy. I am going to tell you one or two things. When I first examined the haunted chamber, I decided that there must be a trapdoor there. I went into it alone, and discovered the trapdoor. I had my two friends, Bud Morgan and Ben Tremont, search the whole house, to see were the tunnel went to—I knew that there must be some communication between the cellar and outdoors."

"What!" said Pablo, with an oath. "Do they know about this, too?"

"Hear me through. There is more that will interest you. While my friends were hanging about the ranch, looking at the live stock, they were looking at other things, too. They were looking over all the cabins, and they reported to me this morning that the tunnel must come out in this very cabin."

"Madre di dios! You are good to tell us this. We must capture them."

"A little more patience, my friend. They had their eyes on this cabin. They also knew that I was to sleep in the haunted chamber. I thought that something of this kind might happen——"

"But they were deceived. They thought that you had fallen from your horse. They thought you were lost. They knew no more than I did."

"Pardon me. They knew a great deal more. They knew what I had planned. They knew that I might attempt some ruse of that kind. They had their work planned out. They were to act so as not to let anyone else, even Gonzales, into the secret."

The men had gathered close around the young rough rider now, and were listening to him intently. The expression of their faces told them that they were surprised at what they heard.

Ted had turned the tables on them. Although he was bound and sentenced to die, his captors looked much more terrified than he did.

"Bah!" said Pablo. "This is a lie that he tells to put off the time of his death a little longer."

"There isn't much more of it to tell," said the young rough rider. "I have been playing for time, but the time is up now. They had instructions to raid this cabin and burst in the door at one. It lacks a few moments of that time. I have played for time."

"What!"

"He lies!"

"Bar the doors!"

"Listen outside!"

The frightened exclamation that came from the men showed how the words of the young rough rider had affected them.

Pablo was the only one who kept his head.

"He lies!" he said. "He must die!"

"Too late!" said the young rough rider.

At the same instant there was a great crash against the heavy door.

It was borne half off its hinges.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ROUND-UP.

This attack from the outside had come without the faintest sound of warning.

The men had imagined that they were quite secure in the place.

They knew that Gonzales had been led off in an entirely wrong direction after he had found the haunted chamber tenantless.

Bud and Ben had carried out their instructions to the letter.

Although they had appeared to join the search for the young rough rider, they were confident that he had not been lost, as was supposed.

They had sent across the border that morning for a party of Texas cowboys whom they could trust.

In this they had acted according to the instructions of the young rough rider, and now, promptly at the stroke of one, they had crept out of the bushes in which they had been hiding, and sent a great log crashing against the door of the cabin.

The first blow loosened it from its hinges, the second sent it into flinders.

Ben Tremont was helping to swing the battering-ram, and the strength that he put into it was enormous.

As the door fell, Bud and Ben, followed by the cowboys, dashed into the room.

They had their weapons out, and they covered the men inside.

If they expected an easy victory, they were mistaken.

The men in the cabin were desperate ruffians, who had been chosen especially for the work.

They were prepared to sell their lives dearly, and as the door crashed in, they drew their weapons and opened fire on the intruders.

Pistols flashed in all directions, and the uproar in the place was deafening.

Pablo and his men fired a withering volley, and for a moment the Texas cowboys were driven back.

Bud Morgan, with a wild yell of defiance, darted forward.

He saw Ted lying on the floor, and he held a knife in his hands.

It was the work of a moment for him to cut the young rough rider loose.

Pablo fired at him, but missed, and a moment later Ted was on his feet.

Pablo, the Mexican, singled him out from all the others, and darted at him with fury blazing in his eyes.

The young rough rider fired at him, but could not check his rush. The Mexican shoved his weapon straight into the face of the young rough rider, and pulled the trigger.

It only clicked.

All the charges that it had contained had been fired.

With a terrible oath, he hurled the weapon into Ted's face.

It struck the young rough rider a heavy crash between the eyes, and sent him staggering.

Pablo leaped upon him at the same time, and grasped him by the throat.

Ted was borne backward and down.

All around him there was a desperate fight going on.

The followers of Pablo were resisting stubbornly.

Ted had been borne to the ground by the Mexican, but he kept his senses about him.

For a moment they struggled and strained.

Then they rolled over, and Ted came above.

Twice he struck Pablo on the point of the jaw. At the second blow, he lay still and ceased to struggle.

He had been knocked senseless.

Ted leaped to his feet, to see that his men had gained the victory.

Two of the followers of Pablo were stretched on the floor, seriously wounded.

The others were crouched in a corner, their hands in the air, the revolvers of the Texan cowboys covering them. Bud Morgan and Ben Tremont were busily engaged in binding them hand and foot.

* * * * * * *

Two days later the young rough rider was seated in the office of the ranch house, facing Miguel Gonzales, the owner of the ranch.

Between them lay a heap of papers.

"I think now," said the young rough rider, "that I can explain all that you would want to know about the White Death."

"You have a number of prisoners across the border, in Texas," said Gonzales. "I suppose that you have been questioning them."

"I have. The man who is primarily responsible for the apparition of the White Death is a trifle too big for us to touch, at present. We have no direct evidence against him, and he is so wealthy that he would be hard to hurt through the courts."

"Who is he?"

"Simon Crane."

"What! The big cattle man! He owns a stretch of range near mine."

"Yes; and he wants that range that you had tried to turn into a sheep farm."

"He had some sort of a claim on it. He sued the government for it."

"He saw that his suit would be sure to be a failure. He hired this man, Pablo, to help him. He knew that if you turned that land into a sheep ranch, it would be worthless for years."

"I would not have believed that of Pablo a little while ago."

"I know you wouldn't. I suspected him from the first. He was hired to come here and work under you. He hired helpers—also in the employ of Crane. They are all prisoners now. It was he who dug that tunnel, and I showed you the phosphorus-coated garments that the White Death appeared in.

"Ross was the fellow who acted the part of the White Death. He was tall naturally. He wore a pair of things like stilts, to make him taller when he appeared as the specter. It was a cleverly contrived scheme to scare you out of using that land. If you had not used it, you know that your claim to it would have lapsed, and that Crane could have got it. Pablo was also hired to steal some of your papers in regard to it—the papers that I have just been looking over. That was how you missed some of your things and found them in this room. They had been stolen here, to be taken down through the trapdoor, and then thrown aside when it was discovered that they were worthless."

"But the sheep herders who had disappeared—what of them?"

"I heard from Bud Morgan this morning," said the young rough rider. "He discovered that Pablo had another camp in the bush, near the sheep farm. Some of your herders were found there, locked in a cabin. They will arrive here later on."

"So that is the end of the White Death," said Gonzales.

"That is the end of it where you are concerned," said the young rough rider. "But as for me—I think that I have made an enemy in Simon Crane whom I will have to fight later on."

THE END.

Next week's issue (45) will contain "The Young Rough Rider in California; or, The Owls of San Pablo." In it you will learn how Simon Crane, the millionaire cattle man, tried to revenge himself upon the young rough rider.

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